

NOT AT RISK
Education as a Work of Heart



Menachem Gottesman, Ph.D.
with
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EDUCATION AS A WORK OF HEART

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Reviews

Dr. Gottesman's magnum opus is MELED – an educational institution which, in many ways, is the very last hope for many boys and girls who do not find their place in the regular schooling frameworks, and consequently not only receive little or nothing there, but sometimes also lose their human path. The institution that Dr. Gottesman has created has greatly influenced its students not to stray away from their families and society: many of them have even attained significant success in their studies.

All this is the outcome not of administrative success but rather of a unique combination of understanding and love. Some educational institutions are full of understanding for their students: their problems are understood, along with their difficulties, and sometimes even the complex and complicated relationships between them and their parents; yet this understanding remains intellectual, like that of professional psychologists. In other places, the love component is uppermost: teachers and instructors love the children and open many gates of love and affection for them, but the great sentimentality with which they operate – which certainly is no blemish – does not always succeed in leading students to the right path for them, in which they can continue to walk.

Dr. Gottesman's success comes about in a way which is not mysterious, but nevertheless has not become a path for the multitudes; yet it has, in and of itself, attained something great, actually saving many souls from various pitfalls and obstacles and leading them toward positive living. This is Dr. Gottesman's secret; and if, by writing *Not At Risk: Education as a Work of Heart*, he can give some of it over to others, then it is definitely something worth getting, for it contains particles from the Tree of Life – something that everyone of us should hold on to.

~ Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, author, teacher, philosopher, social critic, and spiritual mentor; Israel Prize winner.

Many years ago, Dr. Menachem Gottesman took on the mighty Ministry of Education, with its relentless bureaucracy. He challenged accepted “state of the art” knowledge as to the treatment of school drop-outs, especially those from the national-religious sector. His pain and empathy for youths that don’t fit into the system, including some inhabiting Zion Square at night and seeking succour and relief/release from drugs, forced him to search for an alternative approach to saving their lives.

Some brave solitary individuals of influence who were convinced by Gottesman’s arguments, and became keenly aware of the truth of his assertions, believed in him and his “crusade,” and joined in the epic battle against the bureaucratic ministerial “foe.” It was by no means an easy battle. Gradually, as the number of students grew at Meled, officialdom began to admit to the existence of the drop-out phenomenon and offer meager support.

Gottesman created a supportive educational and emotionally reconstructive refuge for those without an appropriate school setting. Through bottomless love, unending faith in the basic good of their human nature, this “adoptive father” and his staff formed a new safe-haven of warmth and care, some, even in his home. Minimal prior demands, slow and gradual acceptance, maximum flexibility, tailor-made programming - these were the key-elements in his innovative approach described in *Not At Risk: Education as a Work of Heart*.

[Love, faith and support – these are the cardinal components in their epic odyssey.] From the streets of Jerusalem to the army or national service and the University, from loneliness to marriage and family life, from rejection to acceptance and reconciliation, despair to hope – youths of all kinds are illuminated along their route of travail by the school’s beacon of light.

~ Rabbi Prof. Daniel Sperber, author, scholar, Professor of Talmud, Bar-Ilan University, Israel Prize Winner.

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“Learning is but an adjunct to ourselves, and where we are, our
learning likewise is.”

– William Shakespeare

Dedication

In loving memory of three young Meled graduates who gave their lives:

In dedicated service to his country during an armored personnel carrier training accident, Aviad Kulitz lost his life.

To save his army officer's life during a low-glide parachute exercise, Yosef Yitzhak Goodman valiantly sacrificed his own.

After completing his army service and a successful year of university studies in communications, Yoni Luria heroically gave his life in an effort to save a drowning classmate.

We dedicate all our efforts to infusing other young lives with affirmation and purpose ... and the means to go beyond.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Meled's guiding light, Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber, who offered me invaluable guidance, trust, and latitude in developing the school's parameters. He understood what I was setting out to do and, as Chairman of Meled's Board for its initial years, partnered with me in implementing a joint vision.

Rabbi MK Chanan Porat, of blessed memory, had a profound interest in and concern for youths at risk within the religious community. He promoted the school enthusiastically among the influential inner circles of Israel's governmental authorities, helping it to become a reality.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz understood the challenges we faced in our student population and reaffirmed the philosophical principles on which Meled is based.

Each of these luminaries, in his own way, provided Meled with vital support, direction and spiritual guidance.

Rabbi Professor Yitzhak Greenberg has been a source of encouragement. He trusted the work I was doing implicitly and respected its significance. I am grateful to him for lending his name in recognition of our work at the school.

I deeply appreciate the previous Board Chairwoman, Mrs. Sarah Kresh, for her astute insights and devotion to the school's mission.

Not at risk

The present Board Chairman, Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner, along with Ephraim Greenfield and our other dedicated Board members, have provided Meled, as well as me, personally, with immeasurable support. Their leadership and generosity have ensured our existence and have helped make this book possible.

Galya Lowy's encouragement of the initial format of the book was deeply appreciated. My thanks to Deborah Meghnagi Bailey for her in-depth editing of the manuscript's early drafts. Mirit Salzman, a Meled graduate, drew on both her understanding of the school's mission and her professional expertise when she so kindly designed the book's two illustrations. Much credit goes to the many graduates who generously agreed to write and to share their stories in this book, as well as to the staff members and parents who have shared their impressions of the school.

Working with Menorah's highly dedicated professional staff, from its editor-in-chief Ashirah Yosefah, content editor Esther Cameron, and copy editor Shoshana Rotem, to its proof-readers, and graphics professionals, has been tremendously supportive and stimulating. Special thanks are owed to Koren publisher Matthew Miller.

I want to express my deep gratitude to all those who have extended their support of this endeavour, including Judy and Roy Stern, Aaron and Roz Demsky, Judy and Shmuel Klitsner, Sam and Edna Wilchfort, and Moshe and Debbie Krimm Pack. Their belief in our work is cherished.

The amazing success of our Meled students is due, above all, to the uncompromising loyalty and devotion of so many members of Meled's staff who have given and continue to give of themselves unceasingly, now under the leadership of the school's new principal Mr. Michael Kersh.

When my mother, of blessed memory, was lying in a Brooklyn hospital, close to death, she urged me to leave her side to return home to Israel to be with my students. She told me, "They need you even more than I." For her insights and her indescribable devotion, I am forever grateful.

Meled has been a long journey. None of it could have happened without Les – my life partner – who has been involved in every facet of the school and has welcomed any students who were in need of a home. It is fitting that *Not At Risk* is a product of our joint efforts to shed light

Acknowledgements

on Meled's unique story. We toiled together, at times even disagreeing, but always in view of a common goal: to shed light on one of Jerusalem's best-kept educational secrets.

Our beloved children, their dear spouses, and our precious grandchildren – have always been a source of support and loving encouragement of all that the school stands for.

Above all, I owe the greatest thanks to the Almighty for endowing me with the courage and wisdom to create a *Not At Risk* educational model for engaging hearts, freeing spirits.

Introduction

Free will is the most distinctive feature of the Divine Image in which man is created. The depth of human despair represents the complete loss of free will, as well as the loss of hope and value.

– SAMSON RAFAEL HIRSCH

It didn't happen overnight. *Mercaz L'Mida Dati*, better known as Meled, Jerusalem, the Alternative Religious High School, or Learning Center, was founded years after the fateful day when my youngest child was summarily kicked out of his high school, at the raw age of fifteen.

The day is seared into my mind. It was 1991, during the Persian Gulf War, and Israel was being bombarded daily by Scud missiles. I was rushing to unlock my front door as sirens howled, warning of an impending attack, when I found a note wedged into the door frame, politely excusing my tenth-grader from any further school obligations. How could I forget such a moment?

The note informed me that my son would be better off outside the school framework than within it. These were the principal's words,

signed by my son's homeroom teacher. It was as if this troubled adolescent had been brought into the world to adorn "the street," and it was our place as parents to accept the apparent logic of this decree. It was untenable; as untenable as having to hide behind gas masks in sealed rooms, but we were expected to accept both as part of the natural scheme of things.

During the period our son spent out of school, our home filled up with heartache, accusations, and tension. Years passed before I realized what I had to undertake. By then, he was serving in an elite unit of the Israel Defense Forces. At a family celebration, this proud soldier urged me to create an educational facility for students like he had been, whom the school system had refused to accommodate. The angst underlying that suggestion captivated me, and the first tendrils of the idea that ultimately became Meled took hold. I would create a new program, a refuge for those either rejected from or rejecting of the standard classroom.

My first task was to undertake an in-depth review of the literature and research on "dropout-ism" in Western society as a whole and Israel in particular. I was both intrigued by the challenges inherent in this phenomenon and convinced of the possibility of providing hope through various interventions. The percentage of dropouts in the two societies proved to be similar – approximately eight to ten percent of the school population. Some of these adolescents adrift had special needs; some might eventually require residential settings; but what all of them needed was a haven, a safe harbor.

During *Neilah*, the closing service of the Jewish Day of Atonement, we appeal to the Almighty to reconsider his judgment; to give us a second chance. A second chance at acceptance is vital for a child's wellbeing. Could I possibly provide this as an educator? Little did I know that one day I'd be able to welcome to the school a student who had been rejected by fourteen different educational settings.

I seized the opportunity to challenge the "at risk" label ascribed to this population of adolescents. In my determination to shed light on the strengths and insights of these youth for all, including them, to see, I ultimately redeemed myself. The experience would prove to be my greatest joy. For this, I owe our Meled students tremendous gratitude. Their challenge was my challenge; this book is not my story, but theirs. Wherever names have been used, in the student accounts or in any anecdotes related, they have been altered to protect the students' privacy.

Chapter 1

Life Support Systems

“We must seek a different kind of education, an education that takes persons into account, that seeks, fosters, and builds on the universal human quest.”

– HERBERT A. THELEN

T

Three main sources, which I had encountered over the course of my professional life, shaped the educational philosophy of Meled: A.S. Neill’s philosophy of education, the therapeutic method developed by Dr. Milton H. Erickson, and the spiritual outlook of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION: A.S. NEILL

Nothing happens by accident. While browsing through library stacks at Yeshiva University as an undergraduate psychology major, I came across Alexander Sutherland Neill’s book *Summerhill, A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. I was captivated by this account of an alternative form of education.

Most educators today give only lip service, if that, to the concepts of freedom and choice in the classroom and in the larger school setting. That was not the case with Neill, who, in 1921, established a boarding school named Summerhill in the British coastal town of Leiston, Suffolk. Neill's concepts of freedom and choice in education from a child's earliest years had a profound impact on me. Central to his philosophy was the need "to make the school fit the child,"¹ and not, as is so often the case, the other way around. In his words, "We set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves. In order to do this, we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction. We have been called brave, but it did not require courage. All it required was what we had – a complete belief in the child as a good, not an evil, being."²

In a later edition of Neill's book, the editor, A. Lamb, quoted Neill: "In a way, our task as teachers is to fight against a mass psychology, a sheep psychology, where every animal has the same coating and the same baa, baa... barring the black sheep, and the challengers."³ Summerhill's *raison d'être* was – and still is – the provision of extensive freedom to its students, who range in age from early childhood to mid-adolescence. Neill believed that education should direct itself to psychic and emotional needs, as opposed to merely intellectual ones. His dictum was that children are not born emotionally crippled.

At Summerhill, children are divided into three age groups: five to seven, eight to ten, and eleven to fifteen. Lessons are optional, and there is no requirement as to when children start attending classes. Most children do choose to attend.

Despite his *laissez-faire* attitude towards relationships between the sexes, Neill's dedication to freedom did not imply that students have a license to do whatever they wish. At Summerhill school, rules are determined by both students and staff, who have equal voting

1. A. S. Neill, *Summerhill – A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1960), 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. A.S. Neill, *Summerhill School: A New View of Childhood*, ed. A. Lamb (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 5.

rights; once the rules are agreed upon, they are enforced. Above all, three tenets are upheld: a student may not intrude upon the privacy of others; mutual respect is a given; and everyone has a right to his or her personal possessions.

Neill believed that every child has the capacity to love life and to develop a wide variety of interests. He recognized the child's innate potential for developing a meaningful life. Labels such as lazy or impulsive or violent, that so often stigmatize children and become ingrained in students' self-perception, were rejected by Neill as judgmental barricades against a child's happiness. Removing these labels allows for a smoother interaction between students and staff, providing both with an opportunity for mutual respect.

Furthermore, he viewed as counterproductive, even harmful, a child's fear of dogmatic discipline, together with fear of authority figures. This paradigm of guilt, inculcated by conventional pedagogy, impedes independence. Instead, Neill held that children are inherently good. When fear is abolished, children are happy and therefore enjoy learning.

Neill was a pioneering educator, and he is still considered revolutionary in his iconoclastic approach to school hierarchy and his view of student rights. He saw the adolescent as balancing tensions in a search for a secure center. He believed that all those engaged in this struggle want to be touched (figuratively), to be loved, accepted and feel important within their surroundings. Ultimately, they want to possess their own lives, not those of their parents or educators. With the freedom to be themselves, without the fear of discipline, students are able to build self-confidence, the vital prerequisite for not just attending classes but taking an interest in their studies. Essential to the Summerhill approach is the respect it engenders towards teachers who maintain an open-door policy. In an environment so supportive of student self-determination, most problems can be solved or, at the least, ameliorated.

Erich Fromm, a noted psychoanalyst and humanistic philosopher, saw the therapeutic value of Neill's approach to education. In his foreword to Neill's *Summerhill*, he wrote: "Neill demonstrates that life is to be grasped, not avoided."⁴ Further, he described Summerhill

4. *Ibid.*, xv.

as “possibly the happiest school in the world”⁵ and claimed the school had no violence.

When the concept of Meled was in its gestation, the compelling approach of this avant-garde educator came back to me. Today, as in the years when Summerhill was created, teens face inner conflict even while they long for control of their own lives. They seek validation of their feelings and acceptance for what they are. It is for those who lack acceptance or cannot actualize themselves in the existing system with its standardized regulations that the Meled high school would be created.

As at Summerhill, Meled’s focus would be on the individual, not on the curriculum. Students would be free to choose their program, to decide which subjects to study – or whether they would study at all.

Like Summerhill, Meled would offer its students unconditional love and acceptance. A no-strings attached policy would remove the resistance many of its students would have developed towards education or towards life, in general. The entire school would be there for the student.

Meled would differ from Summerhill’s in some important ways. It would not be residential, nor would it permit free sex. It would encourage religious observance; although the school would be entirely non-coercive with regard to religious practice, its philosophy would include religious tenets. The regulations of Israel’s Ministry of Education would be upheld, particularly regarding substance abuse, physical or verbal abuse, and the expectation of a minimal dress code. Whereas Summerhill’s curriculum focuses on vocational training, Meled’s curriculum would be based on the academic requirements for matriculation established by Israel’s Ministry of Education. While Neill spoke of happiness, Meled students would be advised of the challenges inherent in the freedom they would discover at the school. They would be told that free choice would ultimately involve a modicum of responsibility.

Despite these many differences, a British educator identified Meled, early on in its development, as a Jewish version of Summerhill. By adapting many of Summerhill’s principles to Meled’s student population, we would obtain remarkable results.

5. *Ibid.*, 8.

**THE THERAPEUTIC DIMENSION:
MILTON H. ERICKSON, M.D.**

In the early eighties I co-founded Shearim Institute of Jewish Development in Jerusalem. Our institute focused on areas of personal growth, verifiable by scientific standards, that would be compatible with frameworks of vibrant Jewish communal life. As part of my work there, I reviewed research on therapeutic communication, most of all the works of the famed psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dr. Milton Hyland Erickson. Among the contemporary psychological and educational theories that we examined, the technology of rapid transformational change developed by Erickson in the Midwest in the mid-1900s seemed the most effective.

Erickson saw the unconscious mind as creative and solution-generating. He specialized in medical hypnosis and family therapy, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), and brief therapy.

Brief therapy is solution-based rather than problem-oriented, less concerned with how a problem arose than with the factors that sustain it and prevent change. Ericksonian brief therapy is based on three core concepts that were later summarized in a book by Stephen and Carol Lankton: “to respect and value the client’s beliefs, to trust in the capacity to change, and to protect the integrity of the client.”⁶ These three principles would help us to create a healing environment for Meled’s students.

The most fundamental way of showing respect and valuing the student as an individual is to accept the student’s inalienable right to his or her beliefs. In addition, each student’s particular form of expression should be acknowledged, regardless of any disagreements.

To accomplish this, we needed to understand the student’s present world-view and perspective on life, and to direct all communication accordingly. Staff members would be required to set aside their individual biases and fully accept students as they are, without judgment. Our values and beliefs could be expressed, but would not be imposed on students. We would recognize the need to protect

6. Stephen and Carol Lankton, *The Answer Within: A Clinical Framework of Ericksonian Hypnotherapy* (Bethel, CN: Crown House Publishing, 2008), 9.

students' freedom of thought, regardless of potential pitfalls; they are entitled to experience failure as part of their journey. Furthermore, we would encourage students to share only that part of their narrative they wished to reveal.

In the Ericksonian tradition, there is an emphasis on the future; on the hope of change. Thus, we would trust in our students' capacity to change, reflecting a belief in change as constant and inevitable. Furthermore, in a supportive environment, the momentum of change is usually towards health and the self-healing process, because, as Erickson saw, the unconscious is creative, solution-generating, and often positive. The confused individual is inclined to draw upon his unconscious to reach clarity.

Allowances would always be made for regression, however, particularly when change was resisted. Youths at risk may know more about themselves than they think or are willing to let on, so it would be critical to focus on their progress as opposed to any relapses. In many cases, resistance to change could be the student's way of testing the authority figures interacting with the student.

The third component, protecting the integrity of the student, would be predicated on recognizing the separation between the student and the problem he or she is dealing with. The student isn't the problem; the student *has* the problem. That message frees the student from a sense of worthlessness and despair.

I had witnessed that transformation in my own son. Upon entering a prestigious army unit in the Israeli Defense Forces, this young man gained the confidence to undergo a comprehensive didactic assessment. Discovering that he had attention deficit was a total vindication. As he saw it, "It's that problem, not I, that has gotten in my way all along. And now I can deal with it."

Like Erickson, who employed indirect suggestions to empower his clients, we would encourage students to use their own resources in problem solving. The school staff would convey the message that students ultimately know – even if only in their subconscious – what is needed to resolve their own issues.

Analogic Communication

A vital component of Erickson's approach to effecting behavioural changes is the sporadic but targeted use of analogic language, as well as humor and metaphor. Much of my understanding of communication at the educational level is drawn from Erickson's application of analogic language in family therapy.

What is analogic language? In *The Language of Change: Elements of Therapeutic Communication*, Paul Watzlawick posits that we communicate in two basic modes of language, corresponding to the respective functions of the two hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere is the dominant one; its main function "appears to be the translation of perceptions into logical semantic and phonetic representations of reality."⁷ It perceives the outside world on the basis of logical analytic coding. It requires a language that is concrete, logical, and exact. Communication must be as precise as possible. This type of language is called digital. Names of objects, numbers, and scientific concepts are examples of digital language. Acts of explanation, interpretation, or definition rely mainly on the digital mode.

The other side of the brain, the right hemisphere, is the aesthetic, experiential side. It perceives in a different fashion: "It is highly specialized in the holistic grasping of complex relationships, patterns, configurations and structures."⁸ It is the right hemisphere that provides us with the awareness of depth, assigns meaningfulness, and experiences relationships. The right hemisphere communicates in an analogic mode. Analogical language does not explain or analyze, but rather creates and evokes images or feelings for the listener. It relies on ambiguity, humor, symbols, stories, rituals, art, and aphorisms.

These modes of perception and functioning of the two hemispheres are, in other words, ways of knowing the world around us and knowing ourselves. The eye that looks outward is the same eye that looks inward.

7. Paul Watzlawick, *The Language of Change: Elements of Therapeutic Communication* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 21.

8. *Ibid.*, 22.

The cardinal rule that evolves from this assumption of different hemispheres/different languages is that any attempt to influence knowledge found in a particular hemisphere must use the appropriate language or go unheard. Both languages have important functions but must be used appropriately to be effective. “The left hemisphere is likely blocked by logical nonsense of the message while the right hemisphere, with its very different archaic logic, literally gets the message.”⁹

A core assumption of brief therapy is that intervention should be directed towards right hemisphere functions, for they hold the key to the basic gestalt of self and world. Engaging the right hemisphere, therefore, is essential to facilitating behavioral change. Humor is especially effective in engaging the right hemisphere. According to psychologist Edward de Bono, reason can organize perceptions, but it is humor that alters them.¹⁰

Sidney Rosen, a psychiatrist and disciple of Erickson, collected many of Erickson’s teaching stories in his book, *My Voice Will Go With You: The Teaching Tales of Milton H. Erickson*. One example will suffice to illustrate the power of the analogic approach. He shares the case of:

... a young girl who hated the world because she felt embarrassed by her bright red freckles. The mother, no doubt digitally, tried to persuade her ten-year-old daughter to feel differently. Exasperated, the mother turned to a number of professionals but they, too, failed. Erickson, in a brief exchange, confronted the girl, who glared at him while standing in the doorway of his office. ‘You are a thief,’ Erickson exclaimed. Defiantly, the girl denied the absurd accusation. In response, Erickson cried out, ‘I can prove it! I know what you stole, where you stole it and how you stole it.’ The girl was confused but challenged. She was ready to hear more. ‘You were in the kitchen when you saw cinnamon cookies on a high shelf. You climbed on a chair, reached all the way up, tipped the cookie jar so that the cookies fell. The cinnamon splattered all over your face and that’s why you are a cinnamon

9. Ibid., 88.

10. Paraphrased from “Quotes by Dr. Edward De Bono,” <https://www.slideshare.net/eridaprifiti/edward-de-bono-quotes>, slide 14.

face.’ The girl silently turned around and left. The mother called Erickson a few days later to report that every time her daughter looked into the mirror, she would burst into laughter. Without dealing with the complexity of its dynamics, this brief example shows how a basic premise about a deeply imbedded self-image was changed, without ever entering into confrontation or explanation. While freckles could not be changed, he changed the way she saw them. Cinnamon, that nice stuff that is sprinkled on food to make it taste better, was certainly a good substitute for hated freckles. Follow-up letters between Erickson and the girl throughout the years testify to the lasting meaningfulness of brief intervention through analogic language.¹¹

Erickson repeatedly stated that change comes not as a result of new learning, but rather when the listener forms a connection between some presented solution and a deeply-imbedded memory or image that had been covered up until that point. The function of analogic communication is to circumvent the layers of new and only partially satisfying knowledge to reach the deeper core of the personality, with which it is in sync. The teacher, as well as the therapist, can apply this understanding in his or her interactions with students. Assuring students from abusive homes, for example, that they are still entitled to feel love for their parents has opened an avenue of family reconnection, if not reconciliation.

In order to relate to students’ interests, expectations, and form of expression, many of Meled’s staff employ humor, metaphoric and indirect language, even startling allusions, to motivate change in the student. On a wider scale, such opportunities can be provided through the medium of creative expression – through drama or music, through poetry or prose, through art.

Integration of the Ericksonian approach to brief therapy with Neill’s guiding principles of making the school fit the child would provide the infrastructure for a successful self-healing process at Meled. For however long students would be attached to the school, assessments

11. Sidney Rosen, ed., *My Voice Will Go With You: The Teaching Tales of Milton H. Erickson* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 151-152.

of their progress would be based on observations rather than previous reports, on learning what doesn't work – as well as what does, in realizing what their future holds in store.

**THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION: RABBI
DR. JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK**

During my student years at Yeshiva University (YU) in the early sixties, I was exposed to the extraordinary outlook of one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik (referred to as “the Rav”). I never formally studied under the Rav, but during my four years as an undergraduate, I attended all of his public lectures at the university. On occasion I sat in on his classes, learning more about the person than the subject matter under discussion. His broad perspective, combining talmudic and legal insights with medieval, modern and post-modern philosophy, had a profound influence on my worldview and on my Judaism. It has contributed vastly to my understanding of humanity.

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, “... man is unique by virtue of his ability to make of himself more than he is by nature.”¹² One of the ultimate goals of life, therefore, is the creative development of one's uniqueness and individuality. This belief became a cornerstone of Meled's philosophy. The student would receive validation, not only of what he or she already is, but of what he or she could ultimately become.

To educate in keeping with the Rav is to discover, to open up, to develop, and draw out hidden potential. It was a beloved friend and Torah scholar, the late Rabbi Dr. Zvi Faier, who stressed that education is essentially about empowering students to strive. They must be taught, not only to exercise their innate capabilities, but also be guided in how to grow and achieve *beyond* what's expected, to transcend themselves.

According to this school of thought, the teacher should dedicate his or her life to the inner worth and unlimited capacity of the student. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains:

12. Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New York: OU Press, 2012), 404.

Indeed, educational endeavors require of the teacher patience and the ability to wait for results; to work ceaselessly without obtaining immediate and tangible benefits; to invest energy, time, and attention without being rewarded the next instant; to turn one's face to the future and sacrifice continually for a great vision that may never be realized during the teacher's lifespan.¹³

This requires a great deal of faith.

Rabbi Soloveitchik "saw the teacher's role as sharing his spiritual wealth with his students, without domination or control."¹⁴ The teacher shares not only information but experiences, visions, and dreams – in short, his or her very essence. Beyond what students learn, they acquire a way of acting and feeling by observing the teacher's behavior. Teaching is accomplished through setting an example. Only when teachers are able to convey an optimism and passion for life can they foster hope for others.

By bringing his or her life experiences into the educational process, a teacher attains closeness with students. In Soloveitchik's view, "One cannot teach unless one tears down all barriers separating individuals from each other."¹⁵ It is a process of sharing, not a mechanical transmission of information, and should draw on an inner well of kindness and giving of affection and mutual respect. In the Rav's words, "... I love teaching... . [It is] a great experience, inspiring, redeeming and cleansing of body and soul. I enjoy sharing knowledge with others; I like the dialogue between teacher and student and I find fulfillment in it."¹⁶

A sense of connectedness between student and teacher can fill the spiritual void many adolescents feel. The relationship benefits both parties, allowing the teacher to attain greater self-actualization:

13. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. Shatz, Wolowelsky, and Ziegler (New Jersey: Ktav, 2008), 97-98.

14. Ziegler, Reuven, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Brookline: Maimonides School, New York: OU Press, New York: Lambda, 2012), 145

15. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, ed. Shatz, Wolowelsky, and Ziegler (New Jersey: Ktav, 2013), 158.

16. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communication*, ed. Nathaniel Helfgot (New Jersey: Ktav, 2005), 338.

For example, when a teacher instructs his students, he is the giver..., while his students, who absorb his ideas, are... the *nukva* [receivers]. At one point in the lesson, however, a perceptive student may ask a particularly incisive question that leads the thoughts of the teacher in new directions... At this juncture, the... roles are reversed.... Who is the giver and who is the receiver? Who influences and who is influenced? As underdeveloped as one's intellect may be, no one is exclusively a student. And as great as a person may be intellectually, no one is exclusively a teacher.¹⁷

Despite major differences, Rabbi Soloveitchik's philosophy complements those of both Erickson and Neill. Rabbi Soloveitchik's perception of adolescent development resonates with that of Erickson when he writes: "A teenager may display extraordinary capacity for creative thinking. It may happen that one area of the brain of otherwise immature persons can be charged with enormous intellectual energy while other areas are still dormant."¹⁸ Rabbi Soloveitchik also held that knowledge imparted effectively can be therapeutic – in my view, for both teacher and student.

While Neill expounded a philosophy of giving students freedom in order to learn, Rav Soloveitchik viewed education as a tool to help students utilize that freedom. In his philosophy, the teacher not only enlightens students' minds but also sensitizes their hearts, connecting them to an inner spirituality. By viewing the student in the spiritual dimension, at Meled, we would enhance our work in the educational and therapeutic spheres.

A Three-Dimensional Matrix

The Meled philosophy would be based on a synergy between selected principles of Neill's educational philosophy, aspects of Erickson's model of brief therapy, and Rabbi Soloveitchik's conception of the spiritual dimension in the teacher/student relationship. Freedom to choose,

17. Arnold Lustiger, ed., *Chumush Mesoras Harav: Sefer Bereishiis* (New York: OU Press, 2013), 11.

18. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Clark, Wolowelsky and Ziegler (New Jersey: Ktav, 2007), 90.

Life Support Systems at Meled



freedom to change, and freedom to grow spiritually are compatible. Thus, at Meled, a three-dimensional matrix would provide students with strategies that gently induce change and a space in which to feel sufficiently safe to commit to learning. The security afforded by the staff's faith in the students would free these youths to believe in their teachers, in one another, in themselves, and possibly, as well, in their Maker.

Hani's story:

I ended up in Meled because of a trick my revered father played on me, or, more accurately, that the Creator, who sends us reeling forward in the most wondrous of ways, played on me. My father sent me to an interview with a high school principal who he used to meet with every day in a cafe on Hillel Street.

Not at risk

“He’s a great guy – why don’t you just meet him? Just go and check it out.”

Here’s how a conversation between us looked, more or less, in those days:

My revered father: “Why did you blow off the meeting with the principal?”

Me: “I didn’t!”

My revered father: “He said that you didn’t show up.”

Me: “Come on, Dad, really, I didn’t blow him off. I swear! I’m telling you, I got there, I sat opposite the secretary like some moron, she had no idea what I wanted from her, she had no record of a scheduled meeting in her appointments diary, and Mr. Principal himself wasn’t even there!! Shoot – I told you that there’s no point. Don’t waste your time, I don’t even want to go to school anyway. I already told you two years ago when I left (or was chucked out of) the Gymnasia that I don’t have anything to learn and I want to go to work. All these narrow frameworks aren’t for me, and you saw what happened afterward with the Ankori school, right? After you told me to go there and do the guided independent study program (*as if* – it turned out to be just like any other school), and what came of that? A waste of money and a mess with the police, right? Ok, so that’s it. No more garbage anymore please – I’m going to work, I’m going to save for a trip overseas, and if it’s so important to you to do things for the record, I’ll get a *bagrut*¹⁹ alone, as an independent student, but *really* independent this time.”

After an investigation revealed that the ‘experimental high school’ I had gone to for the interview, sitting opposite that poor, innocent secretary, was not the one I was supposed to have gone to, but that I was supposed to have gone to an anonymous little high school that shared the building (that *already* sounded fishy), and after more urging by my honored and revered father, I set off again to meet the principal.

Internal dialogue after my meeting with Menachem: Interesting. That grandpa is *waaay* cute... he was on my side during the whole conversation, rooting for me, trying to convince me to come. “The ball is

19. The Hebrew term for high school matriculation exams given by the Israel Ministry of Education.

in your court.” I could go for all the stuff he said. I could really go for it. Build my own schedule? It sounds good to choose my own study path. Could this really be true? What the heck, it wouldn’t kill me to tie some scarf around my pants before I walk into the school. My friends and I are kinda getting into spirituality anyway, and we’ve met some cool religious people, so why not try?

And the clincher is that that Menachem guy told me not to sign up. Yeah, just like that. He told me not to pay, not to decide, just to come and try, for one day... maybe two days... maybe a week.

Dad has also agreed to the experiment, so there’s nothing holding me back.

Some personal details so you get the picture: I come from a secular home in Jerusalem. My parents are divorced. I’m the youngest sibling in the family, and thank God, it’s a good family – we don’t lack anything. But I had some difficult years, some difficult and confused self-exploration. I remember having to cope with difficult feelings from about the age of twelve. I lived with my father from about the age of thirteen or fourteen, my brother was in the army and then overseas, and my sister in an apartment with her friends. I started high school at the prestigious Gymnasia, but I made sure that when they dropped people after ninth grade, they’d drop me too. After that, I went through tenth and eleventh grades at the Ankori school. I was a ‘party girl,’ making an effort to go to any and every concert, music festival, party and everything that implies. I spent a lot of time in the center of town, and not always with a clear head. I was about seventeen when I got to Meled for twelfth grade with a shaved head and a bunch of piercings, and the truth is that I didn’t stick out too much in my grade – if you could say that Meled has anything you could call a grade. I wouldn’t say that I changed all at once – that I stopped everything I had been doing – but the process I went through at Meled was a lot deeper, more internal, more primal. Meled has such a warm, passionate place in my heart, the staff – there’s nothing like it! Especially my homeroom teacher (Etty Kadosh) and principal (Menachem Gottesman), who didn’t give up on me... they *didn’t give up!* No matter how much I zoned them out, how much I acted bored, how much I ignored them and pushed them away, they kept going until they reached my heart!