

Blog Post: Avoiding “Excellent Sheep” in Jewish Day Schools

By Rabbi Noam Silverman
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Have you ever wondered why so many Biblical characters were shepherds? The original Big Three: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rebecca, and Rachel. All of Jacob’s sons. Moses and even King David. All shepherds. Not one farmer, weaver or innkeeper.



According to one traditional interpretation, the shepherd embodies important qualities that are also central to leadership, such as the ability to lead others and care for individual and communal needs. Working as shepherds helped our Biblical forefathers nurture the capacities to be leaders of people.

But this comparison is also troubling – because people aren’t sheep. Sheep are meek followers. Sheep do what others tell them to do. Sheep lack autonomy and creativity and fiery independence. Do we really want people to act like sheep?

William Deresiewicz, for one, is clear that we do not. In his recent book [Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life](#) (2014), he argues that most or nearly all students enter college without inquiring about their existential purpose: who they are, who they aspire to become, and what greater purpose (beyond career and financial security) they want to commit to.

Recently, my colleague Jon Levisohn and I engaged in a series of conversations about the ways that Jewish day schools are positioned to resist or respond to the “excellent sheep” phenomenon, to educate students towards developing the intellectual curiosity, imagination and moral courage required to tap into their passions and chart a path of their own choosing.

In order to deepen our conversations, we visited three Bay Area Jewish day schools to learn how they help students develop clearer purpose and more broad and compassionate aspirations.

In our visits and conversations, we noticed three recurring themes.

1. **Passionate educators:** In each school, we met educators whose success with student learning was manifest through the sharing and teaching of a deep passion and specific set of skills. These educators, whether teaching music, Jewish Studies or Humanities, had developed a deep knowledge and expertise of what they taught: they lived and breathed their subject matter. Additionally, they were able to convey their knowledge and passion to their students through authentic and hands-on learning experiences. Through hard work and perseverance, students came to see themselves as experts and understand more deeply the intricacies and uniqueness of the subject matter. Educators who are able to harness their passion to a deep body of knowledge seem to help combat the “excellent sheep” mentality by serving as role models for students to learn from someone who cares so deeply about his or her subject and creating opportunities for students to develop expertise and their own passions and interests.
2. **Students are known, seen and given opportunities to voice their ideas:** We observed hallway interactions between administrators or teachers and students that were marked by warmth, care, and direct knowledge of the children. We also heard in each school how students are encouraged to share their own ideas, questions and initiatives. Adults in these schools take students seriously. One head of school told us that she regularly has small groups of students in her office wanting to start a new tzedakah project, or eager to share ideas to improve aspects of student life. This helps students develop the capacities to develop awareness of the needs around them and take action. “Excellent sheep” are great at following directions but they don’t learn how to take responsibility for their own learning or how to respond to others’ needs.
3. **Focus on student learning:** All the schools we visited displayed a deep commitment to content and pedagogy. But encouragingly, all the school leaders and teachers we met shared how they were spending more and more time thinking about student learning and ways to ensure that content and pedagogy would be more closely aligned with their students’ abilities and interests. Increasingly, research has shown that when learning outcomes are matched to student abilities and interests, they demonstrate deeper intellectual curiosity and higher level of engagement. When something is too easy, too hard or simply boring, the impact on students’ self concept as someone who loves to learn is negatively affected.

In the cycle of the Jewish year, we recently began reading the book of *Shemot*, Exodus. The Torah describes how God tries to convince Moshe to take on the great responsibility and near impossible challenge of leading the Israelites from slavery to freedom. Moshe has run away from his privileged life in Egypt and become a shepherd tending a flock. According to the *Midrash*, he notices a sheep that has peeled away from the flock and goes after it. This diversion leads him to encounter God's presence in a bush that was aflame but not consumed. Typically, Moshe's action of tending to a wayward sheep is understood as foreshadowing a characteristic of leadership: inspiring others to follow your lead.

I'd like to offer a different interpretation. When we allow our "sheep," our children and students, to explore on their own, develop their unique passions and interests, take control of their learning and not simply follow instructions, we help them develop the capacities to encounter wondrous, even miraculous learning experiences. Perhaps Moshe's sheep was not lost after all. Moshe, embodying the characteristic of an excellent educator, allowed that sheep to follow its passions and interests. And amazing things happened.