

# Just Between Us

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## *The Challenge of Creative Teens*

*Too many talented Orthodox teenagers abandon yeshivah education to pursue their interests in art or music. Isn't it time we addressed this problem?*

By Sura Jeselsohn

For a variety of religious and cultural reasons, Jewish education has always been highly focused on intellectual acuity and academic achievement. In itself, this traditional value is laudable. Yet today we are losing some of our talented youth from Orthodox Judaism because their creativity is not in areas that we value. This subset of students struggle in our traditional *yeshivot*/day schools for a variety of possible reasons. They may: 1) not be intellectually capable; 2) be intellectually capable, but not interested; 3) have deep interests in areas, such as art or music, not presently catered to in their school environment.

While our community looks askance at the art world, it is my contention that there is nothing intrinsically un-Jewish about art *per se*: our feelings are simply an outgrowth of the negative perspective with which the observant community views the secular definition of artistic temperament and lifestyle. For the sake of these students, who are too precious to lose, we must overcome this long-standing aversion to the art world: it is time to establish a religious high school of music and art.

What would rigorous art training at the high school level involve? Perhaps it could be modeled after the curriculum of one of the premier schools of art in New York City, Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and the Performing Arts. The art

component includes a sequence called Foundation Art, which teaches composition, materials and techniques in drawing, painting and design. Then there are classes in: ceramics; art history; printmaking; 3-D (which is basic three-dimensional design in paper, wood, metal and other materials); oil/acrylic painting; watercolor painting; mural painting; mixed media drawing; fashion; stage design; sculpture; architecture; advertising; photography; illustration; interior design; calligraphy; various forms of illustration, including medical and scientific illustration; anatomy; gallery management; and computer graphics. In addition, the students take a full academic program with a four-year requirement in English and social studies, and a three-year requirement in mathematics, science and foreign language. With modifications and with the addition of Judaic studies at different levels, a day school program could be constructed that would benefit these students in a creative, *Jewish* environment.

What programs already exist in Orthodox circles for these students? In the United States, perhaps the most intensive program that I found is at the Yeshiva of Flatbush (N.Y.) where the students take two 42-minute periods a week as freshmen and sophomores. This is basically training in pencil and paint where the students are introduced to color, design, perspective and three-dimensional drawing. They

can take an advanced elective, as juniors, in watercolor.

At the Maimonides School in Boston, in addition to two hours a week in art training as freshmen, there is an effort to use art to enhance other areas of the curriculum; for example, art and musical forms are used to illuminate concepts in the Book of Jeremiah.

We should also look at model schools in Israel, where the situation is considerably more advanced. The Pelech School for girls in Jerusalem uses art in two different ways. The first is to integrate it into the general program. For example, there have been interdisciplinary study seminars on the Renaissance and on synagogues. In addition, freshmen and sophomores take two hours of art weekly. There are other options that can be pursued as well. Juniors may take an art elective for five hours weekly and the seniors take seven hours weekly. Juniors may also take a program entitled "*Tanach* and the Arts," which synthesizes Biblical themes with creative expression. This last possibility qualifies for two units of the *Tanach Bagrut* [matriculation exam] curriculum.

There are two full-scale art programs in Israel of which I am aware. The first is the Emunah High School in Jerusalem, also for girls, which offers art as one of its four majors. Within a ten-hour school day (four days a week, with 1/2 days twice a week) the stu-

dents spend ten hours a week training in their chosen art major, 16 hours a week on *limudei kodesh*, and take a full program of secular courses. There is a curriculum under development discussing halachic issues as they relate to art, i.e. *tzniut* [personal modesty], and the Biblical ban on graven images.

The second program in Israel is at the Amit Yeshiva High School of Arts & Science in Tzefat, which is only for boys. The school day runs from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., six days a week, with several workshops later into the night. The freshmen spend 15 hours a week learning the basics of shape, color, perspective and techniques. By their junior year they are specializing in a particular category which includes plastic arts, visual arts, Jewish art, photography, design, and computer graphics and animation. In addition, there is a full curriculum of *limudei kodesh* and secular studies. There is also a course on art and artistic customs in Jewish life and attention to issues of *halachah* and *hashkafah*.

So we know that it can be done. The question is how to take these models and meld them into a yeshivah/day school which will attract and hold Jewish students who long for an opportunity to develop their creativity. Once we establish a pilot yeshivah/art school on either the East Coast or West Coast, we will have a working model which can be replicated and modified to work in other regions.

Our talented youth have a relevant role to play in the furtherance of Orthodoxy. They should not be forced to fit the standard mold, risking alienation from Orthodoxy in the process. Through high schools developed specifically to utilize their God-given abilities, they will be encouraged to feel that they need not sacrifice their *Yiddishkeit* in order to fulfill their dreams. **JA**

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