

One of the newest innovations in Jewish education is the emergence of secular textbooks which are tailored to meet the needs of the Orthodox reader. To date, literature anthologies—which are purged of “offensive” language and “questionable” subject matter—have been published by ArtScroll (for students in high school) and Mosdos Press (for students in middle school). Textbooks on biology and other subject areas are in the works.

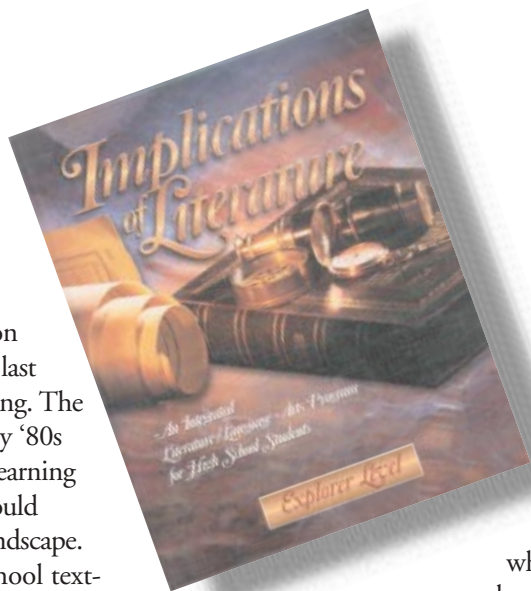
*While the books of both publishers are the product of evident skill and effort, they raise the inevitable question: to what extent do we shield our youth from secular influences? Below, ArtScroll editor **Deborah Schechter** explains the rationale behind the creation of “value-sensitive” textbooks.*

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Schoolhouse

Actually, what has happened on the way to the American schoolhouse in the last four decades is disturbing, rather than amusing. The public schools of the ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s and early ‘80s are history. In their place are institutions of learning with curricula many of us never dreamed would become part of the American educational landscape.

Have you taken a look at some of the school textbooks recently published by the finest, most reputable companies? Did you think that textbooks are just textbooks

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and that the material in them would not reflect the changing social climate? Well, think again. Compelled to make textbooks “relevant” to students’ lives, publishing houses—

which produced delightful anthologies not too long ago—are revamping their products to reflect the changed value system of the contemporary world. A recently published high school literature anthology, for example, included a literary selection written by Margaret Atwood entitled “Rape Fantasies.” The selection, in fact, prompted a principal of a prestigious coed yeshiva to tell this writer that he would not allow the textbook to be used in his

school. In another anthology, a short story by Judy Blume deals with a woman who bears a child out of wedlock. Still another anthology includes a story by Bernard Malamud featuring a typically negative stereotype of Orthodox Jews. Even the sciences are not immune to the changed educational climate. In a junior high school textbook on health education, for example, there are explicit discussions of topics such as sexually transmitted diseases and human sexuality. Furthermore, something seemingly as innocuous as vocabulary is also riddled with problems. In The Princeton Review's *Word Smart II: How to Build a More Educated Vocabulary*, a book designed to assist students in preparing for SAT's and other standardized tests, the following sentences appear:

"The ceaseless *importuning* of her children finally drove Mary Elizabeth over the brink: she stuffed the entire brood in a canvas bag and pitched it over the railing of the bridge."

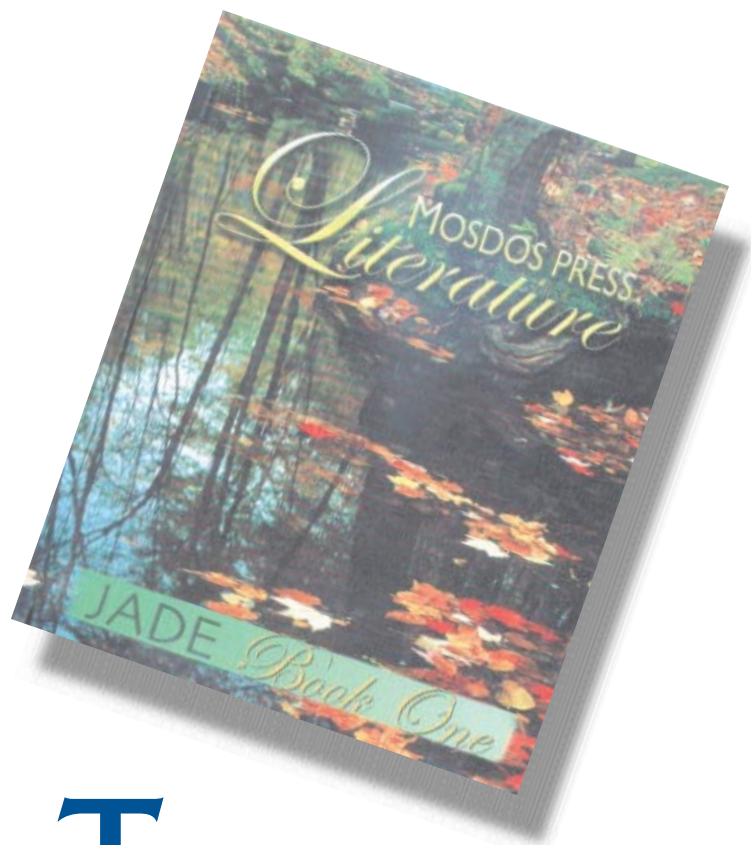
"Clown shoes were Harriet's *fetish*: whenever she saw a pair, she became sexually aroused."

"Students are *fickle*: one day they love you, the next day they attach a pipe bomb to the chassis of your car."

"The *cardinal* rule at our school is simple: no shooting at the teachers. If you have to shoot a gun, shoot it at a student or an administrator." In a society that has experienced school shootings, infanticide, and other horrors, joking about topics such as these for the purpose of memorizing vocabulary words is surely the height of poor taste.

No one is foolish enough to imagine that we can raise our children in a bubble. There is a world out there and we must learn to live in it. However, everything depends on timing. We send our children to yeshivot to transmit Torah ideals and protect their innocence during their formative years. We must ask ourselves whether it is appropriate to introduce them to textbooks containing offensive material during those years. By using some of the contemporary textbooks on the market, we confuse our youngsters by presenting them with a dual value system, one for the morning and an entirely different one for the afternoon. Indeed, introducing questionable material to our students within the walls of the yeshivah may actually teach them to become cynical about the incontrovertible values we present.

In light of the current situation, the need has arisen to produce academically sound, value-sensitive textbooks much on the level of the "golden oldies" of yesteryear. Obviously, these textbooks must compare favorably with standard textbooks on the market as well as meet the academic requirements which permit their purchase with government funding. These innovative textbooks, which first appeared four years ago, have been gratefully welcomed by a broad spectrum of yeshivot and day schools as well as countless parents.



There are those who object to this project on the basis of "censorship." They claim that these textbooks will return us to the dark ages of compulsory ignorance. This is clearly not the case. Regrettably, we can no longer afford to be as liberal as we once were. In the not too distant past, reading novels or viewing films about normal, healthy relationships provided valuable learning experiences and wholesome entertainment. In those days too, standards were more likely to be upheld, and certain lines were rarely crossed. In the current permissive era, however, we can no longer be quite so sanguine about the messages our children receive from the secular world. The abrading of values and the denigration of authority have reached levels that mandate carefully considered countermeasures.

For many of us who were raised and educated in the somewhat saner world that existed decades ago, the ideas presented in this article may well raise hackles. Many of us are not yet quite ready for so radical a change in our thinking. While we know that times have changed, we subliminally believe the statement made by John Knowles in *A Separate Peace*, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." In this case, unfortunately, things have changed beyond recognition. The funny thing that happened on the way to the schoolhouse requires careful scrutiny and thoughtful evaluation. Only after much introspection can valid conclusions be reached, battle lines be drawn, and a plan of action be undertaken, to protect what is immeasurably dear to us—the souls of our children and the promise of our future. **JA**

Left: ArtScroll has produced a four-year literature series for high school students. This page: Mosdos Press's literature series is appropriate for students in grades 7-9.