Other conundrums have been less easily resolved. In fact, more than once we have been hoisted on our own petard! A case in point is the congregation's assertion of gender equality. That has been achieved in most respects — both women and men are called for aliyot and there are more women than men on the board. But committees are another matter, with men dominating those concerned with ritual and finance, while women are concentrated on those charged with education and social events. The traditional separation of spheres, it seems, is hard to shake.

Will our Shtiebel ever be a Congregation

No less ironic are the complications that have arisen with the presence of large numbers of children at services. The hope and policy has always been to encourage their attendance and participation in all shabbat and ritual celebrations; a dull roar was all we asked. In the beginning that is all we got, too. But that ran smack into another congregational desire — time for intense adult study and davening with which the babble of small voices can certainly compete.

This situation was partly (and unintentionally) resolved by a measure designed to enhance child care for those who chose not to attend services. Each week parents devised a hands-on activity that was frequently coordinated with the Torah portion or impending holidays. The problem with these activities was that they proved too engaging. The fear became that we were not as family-centered as we claimed to be, and we scrambled to find an accommodation. This search for a happy medium — in this and other issues — has often proved Sisyphean, but the effort nonetheless cut to the heart of our sense of ourselves.

How these and a host of other concerns will pan out in the future is unclear. Uncertain too is whether we will have a future, and what it will look like. The question of whether to hire a rabbi is hotly debated, and our ability to do so is, in any event, tied to a less than robust budget. Its quality is in turn predicated on the stability of membership; and that is ever in flux, as our fortysomething congregants seek greener pastures in distant more prosperous communities. These pressures, when linked with the smaller, but no less intense personal frictions of daily life, are disruptive indeed. Beth Am's survival, then, is not a given.

But these uncertainties are set aside, even if only momentarily, when each Saturday morning we gather together to celebrate Shabbat. Nowhere is this more pronounced than when we lead off with the powerful Hasidic melody to Ma Tovu: "How lovely are thy tents, Oh Jacob, thy tabernacles Oh Israel." That's our song of songs. 

The torah of tying one's shoelaces

Harold M. Schulweis

Reb Leib Saras said, "I do not go to Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritz to learn the interpretations of the Torah. I go to him to observe his way of tying his shoelaces." Why? Because with the demonstration of his fingers a person teaches meaning.

Dig your hands in your pockets or put them behind your back. Then instruct someone verbally how to tie their shoelaces without the benefit of moving your hands. "First tighten the laces in the eyes of your shoes. Then, holding the shorter lace under your left thumb, press it down against the tongue of the shoe and with your other hand hold the longer right lace, loop it and cross it over...." It is an exhausting exercise bound to leave you tongue tied and exasperated. It is far less frustrating to take your hands out of your pockets, bend down and show the student hands-on the practice of thumbs and fingers to accomplish the tying of the knot.

The difference between the two ways of teaching the philosopher Bertrand Russell called "knowledge by description" and "knowledge by acquaintance." The two kinds of knowledge apply equally to teaching how to ride a bike or swim or play baseball.

And what might it tell us about transmitting Judaism? Much of Jewish education falls into the category of "knowledge by description." From the pulpit, the adult education platform, the teacher's desk, Judaism is talked about. This "about-ism" (Fritz Perl's term) speaks about Jewish practice and beliefs. It yields a meta-Judaic knowledge, one about the Seder, about prayers, about the lulav and etrog, about the Sabbath and kashrut. It is a theoretic and not unimportant way of knowing. At its best it communicates the history and rationale behind Jewish acts.

Such teaching is a response to the pedagogic behaviorism which puts on the tefillin, shakes the lulav.

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sounds the prayers but knows neither why nor what for.

But doing is not knowing, and knowing is not doing. The gap between theoria and praxis is a constant challenge to the educator. To overcome the chasm, behaviorist educators adopt the naaseh v'nishmah (we shall do and we shall heed) pedagogy that contends we learn by first doing and thereafter offering rationale. They have found that examination of the genesis or teleology of ritual, for example, ends up as a spectator sport, sitting and observing those who observe.

The presupposition of pedagogic behaviorism maintains that people believe what they do more than they do what they believe; that people feel what they do more than they do what they feel. Performance overcomes the fissure between theory and practice. Behaviorist pedagogy endorses the leap of action. Its confidence is in ortho-praxy, straight practice.

In Search of the Sacred Dialectic

Many parents prefer knowledge by description because practice is not the major motivation for giving their children a Jewish education. As they express it, they want their children “to know,” say, the history of our people and its practices. And the knowledge they have in mind is theoretic. They abhor ignorance. Ignorance is not knowing what the phylacteries are or how to don them. It has nothing to do with whether or not the tefillin are put on. They are more interested in the phylacteries of the head than in the phylacteries of the hand.

However commendable, behavioral pedagogy often produces routinized and mechanized action devoid of the poetry, philosophy and ethics of the ritual act. Not a few students of such behaviorist instruction complain that they were taught “how” without knowing “what for.” They boast fluency in reading but confess that there is little comprehension or spiritual feeling that attends the recitation. They are proud of their skills in performance but embarrassed by their failure to understand, believe or feel. They have been told that understanding and spirituality will come “later.” But tomorrow never seems to come.

“Midrash” without “maaseh” or “maaseh” without “midrash” are half wisdoms. Theory without practice is empty; practice without theory is blind. And here the shoelace parable breaks down. A shoelace is a functional string, but a pair of tefillin is a religious symbol. Tying a shoelace is a mundane function calling for literal instruction. Whether it is a single or a double knot is of little consequence. But tefillin tied seven times around the weaker arm, in a particular order and with specific prayers requires a different attention. To drop a pair of phylacteries is not to drop a pair of shoelaces. Holiness requires intention, thought, reverence.

Simply to put on the tefillin routinely is to rob the act of its intellectual, moral and spiritual meaning. We have seen proselytizing pietists donning the phylacteries upon the limp arms of half-willing people who pass by, and repeat the mumbling of prayers. The teacher is convinced that the act itself performs the mitzvah. “Later,” he may reason, rationale may come. Inadvertently, an act of immense potential meaning is trivialized.

The Jewish educator must not separate doing from thinking or acting from feeling. That division inadvertently creates a gnawing schism of Jews who practice mindlessly, and Jews for whom Judaism is a speculative game. It destroys the holism we need that unites head, heart and hand in the unifying gesture.

Yizkor, the remembrance of things past

Sara R. Horowitz

In the synagogue where I grew up, when the Chazan pronounced the word “Yizkor,” the children filed out. For most young people, the Memorial Service meant a bonus social hour in the synagogue corridors, a break in the solemnity of Yom Kippur or a fitting culmination to an eight-day holiday. Superstition warned against hearing Yizkor while one’s parents still lived, and consideration for mourners granted them the privacy to grieve uninhibited and unobserved by voyeurs.

Tishrei, the season of memory, prompts us to recall and recount. The Zichronot of the Rosh Hashanah shofar liturgy, wherein we imagine God remembering us, gives way to the personal probing of the past years’ deeds (the 10 days of teshuvah), the private and collective remembering of the Yom Kippur liturgy, the resonances of wilderness and wandering evoked by the Succah, our desert dwelling, the seamless cycle of memory enacted on Simhat Torah.

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