

## Women's Whispers: Are you *hungry*?

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As she approached her Jewish majority, our family opened discussions on finding a high school for our firstborn daughter. A thrill of excitement quickened in me as I contemplated a noble excuse for that most traditional of American pastimes: an educational shopping trip.

Our quest, we believed, was of a type that all parents would embark on for their child. We were seeking an Orthodox girls' school that offered pedagogical excellence within an environment nurturing for a teenager's mind and spirit. Willing to consider schools along the whole range of observance, we were committed to move anywhere in North America if we found our match.

After months of market research, I focused on a few establishments, all far from where we lived. Every one welcomed my visit, but most did not want me to observe classes. I explained that for the sake of our daughter's education, we were contemplating upheavals in our careers and community life. How could we make such a move based on a tour of the school building or by listening to a headmistress's recitation of her own excellence? We had to be able to watch the teachers teach! Most schools relented, allowing us into the classrooms; one establishment entranced me particularly. Teachers demanded much of their students, but there was also laughter in the hallways and camaraderie between students and their masters.

With some trepidation, I brought our daughter several hundred miles to attend the open house.

To say we were disappointed would be too kind. Teachers, students and administrators spoke in hyperbole, platitudes and generalities. The word "amazing" littered every sentence. Amazing friends, amazing teachers, amazing trips – if a word was used enough times, were we supposed to be convinced? Nothing whatever was said about the content of the classes or the range of subjects offered.

Regarding goals, we heard about molding future Jewish wives and mothers, about career day, about seminary year. The word that they seemed to be using to encapsulate their thesis was "growth." Were they thinking of vegetable growth? Or logarithmic growth? Or something else entirely?

Most disorienting of all was the unceasing discussion of food. Pupils stood on stage and told us what they loved about their school. One said her teacher canceled their first test and instead handed out cookies. Even better, the second test was accompanied by lollipops! And so the girls continued, one following the other, with a joyous finale: "Best of all, we're just a block away from a kosher Krispy Kreme!"

We left the open house with no sense of the school's curriculum, its vision of the ideal graduate or what it was striving to contribute to the world. This place had impressed me with its high standards of pedagogy and for the fast bonds between students and teachers; why was it concealing these gems?

I called on my father that night, to ask for an interpretation of the particularly puzzling motif of junk food that had animated the open house, and so find a clue for the disappointment of the day. He is a Holocaust survivor, and for not one moment does he deny the centrality of food in our lives. Upon hearing my story, he instructed me thus: "You must ask them, 'Are you hungry?'"

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What if we had been searching for a school for our son? Asked about its ideal graduate, a yeshiva high school might say: a lifelong learner, an upholder of the laws, a loyal husband and father, supporting his family with dignity (the latter perhaps omitted by the ultra-orthodox). Once the goals are articulated, a boys' school is constructed around those goals.

The lifelong learning a yeshiva hopes for is the learning of Talmud. Most yeshivas offer enough for a boy to compete in state examinations and enter a trade, but this is secondary. In traditional schools, a boy spends at least six hours a day fumbling with, battling and eventually decoding the page of Gemara, molding his mind, bending his heart.

Much brouhaha has been kicked up about the appropriateness of this training for boys. Complaints include that this framework is too hard; too narrow in focus. No homage is paid to the Bible, let alone physics or poetry; it is fit for only one type of mind, the gifted legal mind. But whether or not you like the goals, at least the ideal output from the system is consistent with them.

No such thing can be said of girls' schools, because the goals for an Orthodox girl are unutterable. Housewife – old fashioned; mother – excludes the infertile; careerist – too strident; volunteer do-gooder – too amorphous; lifelong learner – interferes with performance of the other (unutterable) roles.

It was not by mere oversight that the open house failed to articulate a vision for its graduates. When it comes to girls, religious society can agree on *nothing*.

And so girls' schools become, as Jane Austen described two centuries ago, places where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies. Places where facts are distributed and examined upon frequently, but where knowledge is not imparted. Such a repast is unsatisfying. Mercifully, if a girl feels hungry, Krispy Kreme is just a block away.

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