

Let Every Student Shine Like the Gems of the Priestly Breastplate

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In December of 2012, members of the rabbinic search committee visited San Antonio to see me “in action” on the pulpit there. They joined my family for dinner in our home after services, during which I was treated to a light-hearted debate about the best school options in Little Rock. After I was selected as your rabbi, some of the school conversations were less light-hearted. People are passionate about education here.

We had to do what seemed best for our family at the time—disappointing some, pleasing others. Still, the happiest education-related moment for me in Little Rock was the day Daniel agreed that a move to Central High School would be the right choice for him. The opportunities available to him there were extraordinary, as were the relationships with faculty, reminding me of interactions I enjoyed with professors at a small liberal arts college.

The diversity of Daniel’s friends at Central impressed me most. Granted, because Daniel was in Advanced Placement classes, his classrooms were less diverse than the school as a whole. Still, he saw, and we discussed, the variety of ways in which our own Nancy Rousseau and her team work to meet a stunningly wide array of student needs.

Mrs. Rousseau and the Central faculty, like teachers and administrators throughout LRSD, work against considerable odds. Many students do not come from homes where the adults have the time, resources, or education to support their children’s schooling. Parents and guardians in low-income households are often working multiple jobs and might have had poor educations in their own day.

Moreover, Little Rock public schools have suffered from decades of neglect, a history with which I am largely unfamiliar, having lived here less than nine years. Central High School is a showpiece, and some understandably argue that disproportionate attention is focused there; but even at Central, many classes are held in ramshackle portable buildings that should have been there only temporarily.

As a rabbi, I have been involved in social justice efforts in both communities that I have served, but none as meaningful or rewarding as the movement to restore

local democratic control to LRSD. Our school district was failing many of its students when it was taken over by the State Board of Education. The State, though, was more destructive than any local leadership ever could have dreamed of being. Except for two things: First, they engaged a great superintendent; then, when they unjustly fired Baker Kurrus, they hired an excellent replacement, Mike Poore.

Of even greater consequence, State control galvanized Little Rock to focus attention on our schools. I have never been so honored to take part in a rally as I was in the fall of 2019, an hour after breaking the Yom Kippur fast, atop the steps in front of Central High School. Thousands of people gathered to insist on keeping our school district united under local control, and momentum in support of LRSD has continued. We now have a democratically elected school board that works diligently, if imperfectly, to meet the needs of all students and stakeholders. And Little Rock voters responded overwhelmingly by extending the school millage. This morning's newspaper told us that architects have been engaged to plan replacement of those portable buildings at Central—and, even more importantly, that projects in Southwest Little Rock are already well underway, promised to be near completion before groundbreaking at Central or at a new high school in West Little Rock.

The need to spend money in lower income parts of the district before focusing on more prosperous neighborhoods may seem unfair. However, as Rabbi Craig Lewis notes in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, citing the scholarship of Jonathan Kozol, “It is surprising that, in many cases, two schools receive the same funding per student—creating the perception of equality—while the actual costs of providing education are substantially higher in poorer areas.”ⁱ

This week's Torah portion would seem to have nothing to do with education. Instead, we learn about the garments worn by Ancient Israelite priests. Among them is the High Priest's breastplate, featuring twelve precious stones, arranged in four rows of three, each representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel.ⁱⁱ As Rabbi Lewis writes, “It seems like an equitable arrangement for this priestly garment.”ⁱⁱⁱ Laid out as they are, no stone, and therefore no tribe, is smack-dab at the center.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Lewis points out that the twelve tribes do not always enjoy equality: “Land is not apportioned in equal amounts, and favor is shown in the tribes' placement around the Tent of Meeting, as well as in their marching order through the wilderness.”^{iv} Moreover, as we consider the breastplate: “The

stones are not equal in value.”^v And they can’t be! As Rabbi Lewis astutely observes: “The amount of lapis lazuli needed to match the amount of emerald in value would destroy the balance. The stones would be all different sizes, rendering equal rows impossible.”^{vi} A financial measure of equality would destroy the equity of the placement of the stones on the breastplate.

Researching those gemstones, Rabbi Lewis learned, “For proper presentation, each gem demands its own unique treatment before being displayed, and ongoing maintenance for each gem is likewise unique. Cleaning agents used to polish amethyst could cause turquoise to fade. Heat treatments used on rubies could prove harmful to porous gems like lapis lazuli. Brushes used to clean emeralds are not recommended for use on carnelian. If all the gems were handled uniformly, with the exact same resources in equal quantities, some would shine brightly while others would be dimmed into oblivion.”^{vii}

Rabbi Lewis proposes the breastplate as a metaphor for equitable education. If we provide the same to every student, we will fail many. My son thrived with Advanced Placement classes and the debate team. Another student may do great in the same classes Daniel took, and even the same activities, but could accomplish nothing if free breakfast and lunch were not provided—and couldn’t really participate in debate if the coach did not make extraordinary efforts to raise funds to enable them to attend tournaments. Another student, Daniel’s closest high school friend, excelled because Central offers a fantastic studio art program—and, just as importantly, because his teachers affirmed him as a transgender man.

I will conclude with Rabbi Lewis’s words, which articulate a prayer I have for LRSD—indeed, for education across America and around the world: “If students were treated as precious gemstones, according to their unique needs, they would have equity of opportunity...Every student deserves to shine brightly. Rather than treating students as the same raw material, we can consider them holistically—their backgrounds, their parents’ education levels, their financial realities, and the specific pressures they experience. Ensuring educational equity begins, as does our passage of Torah, by envisioning the end goal: a shining array of precious individuals, their needs provided for in way that allows each to be brilliant.”^{viii}

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Craig Lewis, “Equity in Education: Let Every Student Shine,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 136.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 28:16-21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis, p. 135.

^{iv} Lewis, pp. 135-136.

^v Lewis, p. 137.

^{vi} Lewis, p. 137.

^{vii} Lewis, p. 137.

^{viii} Lewis, p. 138.