The Moral Mishnah

How can teachers use the Mishnah as a vehicle for moral education in rabbinics classrooms?
Moral education is in the news.
President Bush has sought to promote character education through public statements such as a proclamation of National Character Counts Week, beginning October 20, 2007 to express a “dedication to promoting values for our young people and encourage all Americans to demonstrate good character.”
On a smaller scale, Jewish day schools seek to cultivate a moral environment, and moral students through a moral mission.
The Mission of New Community Jewish High School is to raise up a new generation of Jewish leaders for whom Jewish values and tradition shape and guide their vision, and for whom knowledge creates possibilities for moral action, good character, and shalom.

New Community Jewish High School
West Hills, Los Angeles area
The Heschel School is dedicated to the values and principles that characterized Rabbi Heschel’s life: **integrity**, intellectual exploration, traditional Jewish study, **justice, righteousness, human dignity**, and holiness. It regards the texts of the Jewish tradition and the history of the Jewish people as fundamental resources for developing ideas, beliefs, behaviors and **values** to shape and inspire the lives of individuals.

*Abraham Joshua Heschel School  
New York*
Philadelphia

- **Mission Statement**
  Raymond and Ruth Perelman Jewish Day School provides students with a values-based Jewish education within the context of a rigorous academic program.

- The goal of the school is to develop confident, accomplished, and caring graduates who have a solid understanding of their history and culture as both Americans and Jews.

A **PJDS** education emphasizes:
- A strong academic program that builds lifelong study skills
- Innovative curriculum that integrates secular and Jewish learning
- Small classes geared to nurturing the growth of each child
- Jewish values and traditions taught in the context of Conservative Judaism
- A love of the Hebrew language and the Jewish people
Boston area Jewish day schools
statements of mission
Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston

MISSION: To provide an outstanding education in English and Hebrew that inspires a love of learning. Celebrates the creativity and achievements of our children, and nurtures lives rooted in Jewish tradition and Torah.
Jewish Community Day School

JCDS promotes love of learning and respect for individual differences. It is a child-centered program with a balance of individualized and group learning opportunities in multi-age classrooms for kindergarten, elementary and middle school students.
That the study and practice of halacha (Torah and mitzvot) are the quintessential core of Judaism.

That halacha must be taught in an honest, sophisticated and challenging manner.

That the school must provide an all-encompassing religious atmosphere in which the observance of halacha in the totality of its ethical and ritual components is central.

That our students be exposed to the beauty of the Jewish tradition and power and profundity of Jewish faith.

That our students be encouraged to strive for moral and spiritual excellence.

The Maimonides School
As much as we believe in cultivating Jewish values and a Jewish moral outlook,

Do we agree on what is Morality? and what is Moral Education?
William Damon, 1988

Katherine Simon, 2001

Philip W. Jackson, et. al., 1992

Thomas Lickona, 1992
Do we want to cultivate in our students a “bag of virtues” (Lickona, William Bennett and other character education advocates)?

OR

Do we want students to “enter the conversation” (Kohlberg, Sizer, Jackson, Damon, Simon and others)?
What is morality?

1. Distinguishing good from bad
2. Obligation to collective standards
3. Concern for others’ welfare
5. Concern for rights of others
6. Commitment to honesty
7. Feeling shame, guilt, contempt when morality is breached
How moral instruction takes place

1. Moral instruction as part of the formal curriculum
3. Rituals, ceremonies
4. Visual displays with moral content
6. Classroom rules
7. Morality of curricular substructure
8. Expressive morality within the classroom

Philip W. Jackson, et. al., 1992
Educating for what?

Thomas Lickona, 1992
Principle 1
Promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character.

Principle 5
Provides students with opportunities for moral action.

Principle 8
Engages the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.

Principle 9
Fosters shared moral leadership and long range support of the character education initiative.

“Eleven Principles of Character Education”
Four domains of questions that unlock moral thinking

1. Questions about ethical behavior
2. Questions about the meaning of human existence
3. Questions about mysteries of life
4. Questions about human dignity; great existential concerns and principles

Katherine Simon, 2001
Places that cultivate moral questions

Classrooms

Beyond the walls

Summer programs
Q: How can we use the rabbinics curriculum to cultivate moral thinking?

A:______________________________
How do students respond?

Mishnah seems straightforward

Mishnah seems logical

Sometimes it seems really hard to understand!
Isn’t Mishnah Avot filled with moral lessons?
Been there.

Done that.
How can you argue with Hillel?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?

mAvot 1:14
The rabbis are all doing their own thing!

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said:
The world stands on three things: on judgment, and on truth and on peace.

mAvot 1:13
Learning from standard Mishnah:

Dictionary skills
People skills: mavericks and theเลือ סוחם
Style: הלכה ואגדה
Discrete units of thought

The explicit and implicit ideas lead to searching questions
Topic #1. Questions about ethical behavior

What good can I ever do?

Do my good deeds add up to anything?

Like...after I give to someone else, does it make me a better person?

What if I give to others, but they don’t want it?
Topic #1 texts

mPeah 1:1
mPeah 1:2
mPesahim 10:1
mBava Metzia 2:1-2:8
These things have no fixed measure: leaving the corners of the field for the poor (פוֹּה/Peah), bringing the first fruits to the Temple, being seen at the Temple on the pilgrimage festivals, and doing deeds of lovingkindness and the study of Torah.

In these things, one enjoys the fruits in this world and merit accrues for him in the world to come: honoring one’s father and mother, and doing deeds of lovingkindness, and bringing peace to one’s fellow, and the study of Torah is equivalent to them all.
Although the rabbis indicated that Peah has no fixed measure, one should not leave less than one-sixtieth for the poor.
What’s so moral about Talmud Torah?

What if I leave Peah, but nobody takes it?

What if I have a bad year?

Why does the Mishnah include pilgrimage in a list of ethical acts?

Isn’t it best to give whatever I feel like giving?

When is it OK not to honor my parents?
On Passover eve, close to the Minhah service, one does not eat until the onset of darkness. Even a poor person among Israel does not eat until he reclines. He receives not less than four cups of wine, and he even may take from the charity plate.
Which is the more important mitzvah: to eat matzah or to share with the poor?

How do we care for the poor on Pesah if there aren’t any where we live?

Is it easier to invite someone to a seder or to contribute to the קדשים / charity plate?

What if the poor person uses drugs but still takes from the קדשים?
If one found books, he must read them once in thirty days; and if he does not know how to read, he must roll them. But he may not study from them for the first time, and no other may read with him. If one found a garment, he must shake it out once in thirty days and spread it out, for its own good, but not for his own honor. Silver vessels or copper vessels, he may make use of them for their own benefit, but not so that they become worn away. Gold vessels or glass vessels, he may not touch until Elijah comes.
You're telling me we won't know what to do until Elijah comes? Why is it a mitzvah and not just a courtesy to return lost objects?

Do books have anything in common with vessels...like should we treat a book as carefully as we treat silver, copper or glass? What do we consider valuable in today’s world?

You’re telling me we won’t know what to do until Elijah comes?
Topic #2. Questions about the meaning of human existence

I like thinking about stuff.

I might not get another chance at this.
Topic #2 texts

mSanhedrin 10:1
mQidushin 1:7
All of Israel has a portion in the World to Come, as it is written, “Your people, all of them righteous/
Shall possess the land for all time (Isaiah 60:21).”

And these do not have a portion of the world to come:
the one who says that there is no mention of the resurrection of the dead in the Torah, and there is no Torah from the heavens, and the apiqorus.
If my conscience leads me to other conclusions that go against tradition, is it possible that tradition is wrong?

Even my rabbi doesn’t believe in Torah min ha-Shamayim!

Do I have to believe these things today, too?
All mitzvot of the son on the father – men are obligated and women are exempt.

And all mitzvot of the father on the son – both men and women are obligated....
Is it better to have religious obligations or is it better to do things voluntarily?

Do men and women, boys and girls experience God differently?

What if a parent doesn’t fulfill her or his obligation?

Is that parent still functioning as a parent?
What is there to wonder about?

Topic #3: The mysteries of life

left 43
Topic #3 texts

mBerachot 4:2, 9:1-5
mKelim 1:6-9
When Rabi Nehunyah ben Hakanah would enter the Bet Midrash and depart, he would offer a short prayer.

They asked him: What place is there for this prayer?

He said to them: When entering I pray that no stumbling block should arise through me and when I leave, I give thanks for my lot.
Is our approach to sacred study less reverent than that of our ancestors?

What stumbling blocks must we remove to have access to mystery?

Can sacred study unlock mystery? ...Or is that for the scientists now?
There are ten sacred levels:
Eretz Yisrael is more sanctified
than any of the other lands.

And what is its sanctity?

That we may bring from it the omer
and the first fruits
and the two loaves of bread,
which we may not bring
from any of the other lands.

mKelim 1:6
Is the divine presence more likely to be found where we bring forward the omer and the first fruits?

Do those things make a place sacred?

What is the difference between sacred space and sacred place?

Are some places today more holy than others?
Topic #4: Human dignity and existential concerns

Who deserves respect?

Does all human life have the same value?
Topic #4 texts:

mBava Qama 8:6
mSanhedrin 4:5
mGittin 5:8
mSotah, Chapter 8
If one cuffs his fellow, he gives him a sela.
...If he slapped him, he gives him two hundred zuz.
If he twitched his ear, if he plucked out his hair,
spat and the spittle reached him,
if he stripped his cloak from him,
if he bared the head of a woman in the marketplace,
he gives four hundred zuz.
This is the general rule: everything is according to the respect due to him.

Rabbi Aqiva said, Even the poorest in Israel are considered as if they are freemen who had lost their property, for they are the sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

mBava Qama 8:6
Therefore man was created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as if he had destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as if he had saved a full world.
And for the sake of peace among men,
that one should not say to his fellow,
“My father is greater than yours;”
and that heretics should not say,
“There are many powers in Heaven.”

Again, to declare the greatness of
the Holy One, blessed be He, for
man stamps out many coins with
one die, and the are all alike,

but the King the King of kings, the
Holy One, blessed be He, stamped
each man with the seal of Adam,
and not one of them is like his fellow. Therefore each and every one is obliged to say, “For my sake the world was created.”

mSanhedrin 4:5
What do you do with someone who doesn’t believe that other people’s lives are valuable?

Isn’t it obvious that all human beings are equal? Are human lives more valuable than animals’ lives?

If you don’t believe in God, where does human dignity come from?
Study of the Mishnah cultivates questions. Can it cultivate people?
Three Moral Outlooks
Permissive

Loves aggadah
(mBava Qama story, etc.)

Follows intuition about doing good

Psychologically inclined - can take it or leave it

Seeks to maximize good

Mishnah supports pursuit of דרכי שלום
Connected

Appreciates reasonable disagreement
(a good " hakovet)

Participates in web of interlocutors
("Catholic Israel")

Obliged to participate
but may exercise free will to dissent
Standard-bearing

Accepts duties, obligations, conventions, traditions, expectations

Accepts objective notions of right and good

(Do you know any adolescent like this?!)

Conclusions:

The Mishnah can function as a gateway to higher order questions about human life, civic responsibility, and religious responsibility. The questions of the Mishnah lead to new questions and demand personal engagement.
Sounds like moral education.
And the students like it.
Thanks to the Perelman Jewish Day School

for the release time
for my fellow travelers in moral education
for the students who want more time to ask questions
Sources

George W. Bush discussing No Child Left Behind:

Educating for Character - Character Education Partnership:
http://www.character.org/site/c.mpD9TOE-J6d/b.3438707/

Moral Questions in the Classroom image:

Children packing boxes (“Goodness” in background):
http://www.ibha.org/student/6and7ChesedJan06.htm

Kehati Mishnah image:
http://www.judaism.com/seriesdisplay.asp?USN=146

Four images of yeshiva study, Tu B’Shevat planting, religious school study, and Chanukah:
http://www.israelimages.com

Summer scenes and “Shabbat shalom”:
http://www.alonim.com/

Wheat fields:
http://www.fotosearch.com/CSK402/ks06074/

Collection plate:
http://www.fotosearch.com/DOI0728/ch064060/

Elderly parent/child
http://hubpages.com/hub/Aging-Parents

Heavens opening up - thunderstorm
http://www.chassidic.com/lightning.html

mBereachot 4:2 - “Student in the campus” and “Boy jumps over dune” from

mKelim 1:6 - “Aerial view of Massada”
Picture 21046
“Synagogue Stained Glass Window”
Picture 10814
www.israelimages.com

Fistfight:
http://www.fotosearch.com/ISP131/ispp051005/

Emergency Room:

http://www.israelimages.com