"The Importance of School Curricula in Implanting Religious Values"

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I would like to thank His Highness the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, as well as all the conference organizers, and not least the people of Qatar for hosting this latest of inter-religious dialogues, and for their very kind hospitality. As a Jew who seeks friendship with Muslims – not least knowing the exceptional commonalities between Judaism and Islam – it is a privilege for me to be present in this very special country, and I am honored to be among many distinguished religious leaders, scholars and not a few friends.

Indeed, in sharing thoughts, perspectives, and insights, it is my hope that this exercise in intellectual exchange and communication can sow seeds for new friendships. During the course of my own focus over recent years on intercommunal – both interreligious and interethnic, as well as international – relations, I have found that the identification of shared goals and shared challenges can open new avenues for practical partnership, for mutual understanding and mutual esteem. And ultimately, to borrow the well-worn cliché, I have found that there truly is more that unites us than that which divides us. Undoubtedly, it would be a supreme and overdue blessing to discover fundamental human commonality in this region where we meet – and for harmonious interpersonal and intersocietal coexistence to be modeled here for the rest of the world.

I have been asked to offer some thoughts, from my own Jewish perspective, on the importance of school curricula in the imparting of religious values. Though I cannot claim to be an educator, I bring the vantage point of a young person who is also a member of a millennia-old faith whose continuity and *raison d'être* have been bound up inextricably with education. I am also the citizen of a Western civilization that has been defined in increasingly significant ways by modernity and secularism, while the most defining values and beliefs of my own life and that of my family remain rooted in the ancient landscape of this very region.

It is thus certainly appropriate, as we seek common ground – particularly those here who look to the patriarch Abraham and his descendents as forefathers – that we reflect on the importance of study and schooling in maintaining our traditions and all that they represent.

Moreover, in a world wherein about 85% are believed to harbor some form of religious faith – Christianity and Islam alone account for approximately three-and-a-half billion adherents – the transmittal of doctrines and values can be considered to be very close to *universal* concerns, while many of even those who are agnostic or non-believing would subscribe to essential values often jointly held, developed, concretized and promulgated by the major religions.

As for Judaism and the Jewish people, it almost goes without saying how central and vital education is to our collective existence. The traditional inclusion of Jews among those seen by Muslims as *ahl al-kitab*, "people of the book," is one of the most valued such designations that come to mind.

It is no secret that Jews have generally placed a premium, even above other significant pursuits, on the amassing and bequeathing of knowledge, religious and otherwise. For a people that has long been few in number and faced with a variety of challenges, this has proved to be a critical asset – this cultivating of "human resources" – while the sacred texts served as a spiritual homeland of sorts, a roving anchor, to Jews in their dispersion throughout the world.

In a helpful summation of the sense of cohesiveness and identity that comes with the study and maintenance of religious precepts, the nineteenth-to-twentieth century Jewish figure Ahad Ha'am said: "More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews." Jews, like all mortals from the dawn of time, have been imperfect; they – we – have at times strayed, and erred, and fallen short of aspirations, even as we have been mercifully preserved, with the help of memory, and hope, and customs such as those of the Sabbath, that symbol of a more peaceful reality, taste of a more elevated existence, and reminder of God's creation of the world and His great intentions for it.

But, in Judaism, scholarship is not simply an option, something to be undertaken and instrumentalized when desired. Rather, it is a paramount commandment and duty: As observant Jews read from Deuteronomy[1] after recital three times daily of *Sh'ma Yisra'el*, the declaration of faith: "Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart." Moreover, the verse's continuation makes clear that one is not entitled to hoard their essential knowledge, but must transmit them to future generations: *v'shinantem l'vanecha* – "Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you lay down and when you arise." Further stressing the need for all – leaders, but also laypeople[2] – to have engagement in study of scripture as a continuous element of life, we read in the book of Joshua[3]: *v'hagita bo yomam va'layla* – "This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; rather, you should contemplate it day and night in order to observe to do according to all that is written in it."

Thus we have enunciated a Jewish truism, that knowledge of the text is a prerequisite to fulfillment of the text. And so, for the very reason that study leads to broader (let alone more meaningful) observance, religious study is not simply one of 613 Biblical commandments, but rather, *talmud Torah k'neged kulam* – in a real way, "the study of Torah is equivalent to them all."[4] Jews are told in the ethical treasury known as the Chapters of the Fathers (*Pirkei Avot*) that their true freedom is manifested in study,[5] and that none should gloat over distinction in Torah

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[1] 6:6-7

[2] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:8

[3] 1:8

[4] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127a

[5] 6:2

study since, after all, and I quote, "it was for this that you were created."[6] The renowned medieval Jewish philosopher, physician and religious authority Maimonides, when asked until when the obligation of Torah study applies, said: until one's very last day.

Yet there should be no mistake that, as we are taught,[7] *lo hamidrash ha'ikar ela ha'maaseh* – "it is not study that is the essence, bur rather action." Indeed, in perhaps the seminal moment of Jewish history, those who received the revelation at Sinai famously declared: *na'aseh v'nishma* – "All that the Lord has said, we will do and we will hear!"[8] Classical commentators interpreted this formulation – agreement to comply even before grasping in full – as reflecting submission to the Divine will, notwithstanding deficiencies in human understanding or appreciation. At the same time, there is little question that, in the Jewish tradition, study of God's word – beyond purely practical instruction – demonstrates the most ambitious, and character-refining, objective: of growing in love and awe of God, by seeking greater familiarity with Him and understanding of His will. This, even as observance of God's will is not dependant on degree of mastery of, or individual comfort with, its reasoning – and undoubtedly that reasoning is at times an objective mystery, beyond our comprehension.[9]

The value – and, for that matter, responsibility – attached to one's own study and to the teaching of others has led in Judaism to related institutions and practices. Study is encouraged communally, and especially in partners. Upon becoming *b'nei mitzva* – reaching the age of obligation in observing the commandments – young Jews lead synagogue prayers along with reading from the Torah and the corresponding portion from the Prophets. Following the Jewish view of heritage faithfully preserved, interpreted and maintained, specialized scholars are ordained as rabbis, and Jews are encouraged to seek out a personal rabbinic authority for competent Jewish spiritual and ritual guidance;[10] in fact, the very word "rabbi" – *rav* – connotes teacher. The relationship in which inestimable wisdom is imparted obliges one in deep respect and gratitude toward another from whom he or she learned even just a bit[11] – while the attitude of the quintessential teacher is that he or she has learned a great deal from mentors and colleagues, but the most of all from engagement with students, for whom lessons must be reviewed, re-explained and analyzed until they are adequately absorbed.

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[6] 2:9

[7] Chapters of the Fathers 1:17

[8] Exodus 24:7

[9] Isaiah 55:8-9

[10] Chapters of the Fathers 1:16

[11] Chapters of the Fathers 6:3

Undoubtedly, then, schooling is held to be utterly crucial in the molding of well-equipped, fully formed – that is, faithful but thinking and probing – religionists. Jews would establish residence only in communities with educational facilities. The Babylonian Talmud relates, in this vein, that "the whole world exists only for schoolchildren."[12]

Regarding the curriculum itself, the general recommendation in *Avot*[13] would have instruction in Bible – that ultimate foundation of Jewish history, theology and law – commence at age 5, and progression in study and analysis of *halacha* (religious law) with immersion in Mishnah and Talmud at age 10 and 15, respectively. However, there has been evolution and diversity in Jewish educational curricula and methods across time, place and ideological and denominational spectrum. Staunchly traditionalist Orthodox schools stress the Talmudic "Oral Law," commentaries and legal codes as including debates and rulings founded on, and applying, Biblical content. The Talmud itself appreciated individualism by conveying the suggestion that students be guided to study areas that resonate with their own hearts.[14] Quite apart from the traditional Ashkenazic village *cheder* of old (or of Chasidic communities today), most modern Jewish educational institutions – whether synagogue-affiliated "Sunday schools" or "Hebrew schools," or the more intensive *yeshiva* academies or "day schools" – extend focus beyond scripture and rabbinic responsa by including classes, often over the course of years, on Jewish history, language, philosophy, ethics and relevant contemporary literature. While passion for the holy texts was encapsulated in the mantra *hafoch ba, va'hafoch ba, d'chula ba*, "delve into it, and delve [further] into it, for everything is in it,"[15] centrist Orthodox institutions have coined an embrace of *Torah u'mada* – both Torah and the sciences – as an expression of reverence for all authentic forms of wisdom on God's earth. Moreover, while women always played an indispensable role in the educational upbringing of young Jews and in the creating of a truly Jewish community, avenues for highly advanced Jewish scholarship by women have expanded dramatically across the Jewish world.

Admittedly, though, the picture that I have portrayed is one largely of the traditional ideal. Like the age-old Jewish emphasis on education, I imagine that contemporary challenges in effectively imparting it may also be relatable to many colleagues in this room, of diverse backgrounds.

Indeed, the modern reality within the Jewish people is one of struggling to contain passive defection or distancing of members from the organized community, or at least from its practiced faith. The world Jewish community of roughly 13 million people is divided nearly evenly between the Diaspora, principally the United States, and Israel. In the latter, the Jewish

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[12] Shabbat 119b

[13] 5:25

[14] Avoda Zara 19a

[15] Chapters of the Fathers 5:26

population (with corresponding public and private educational tracks) can be divided crudely into Orthodox, traditional and secular "thirds," but there is limited possibility of genuine demographic loss to Jewish society. In the United States, however, the Orthodox – whose children make up the strong majority of those enrolled in Jewish religious schools – currently comprise only about 10% of affiliated Jews, yet the majority of affiliated American Jews today associate with the Reform movement (followed by the Conservative movement, also on the liberal flank of Orthodoxy but to the right side of Reform).

Studies consistently show correlation between the preexisting commitment (and significant financial investment) manifested in religious education and continued religious identification and practice. Twenty years ago, the National Jewish Population Survey showed that this identification and practice is declining, with at least 50% of American Jews marrying outside the faith.

Ironically, the separation of church and state in a Western nation like the U.S. – in contrast with many European countries with past or even lingering recognition of official state denominations – has seemed to allow for the relative flourishing of the majority religion, in this case Christianity, while members of minority faiths enjoy equal liberties but are afforded unprecedented temptation and opportunities to not only integrate but assimilate and become disassociated from their unique identity.

Showing the need for better and more widespread religious education, another challenge even in the U.S., considered to be among the most religious Western societies, is overall gaps in religious literacy. In the *U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey* of the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life,[16] released just a few weeks ago, Americans correctly answer only 16 out of 32 questions on "the core teachings, history and leading figures of major world religions." Though Jews and Mormons performed better, with respective correct-answer averages of 20.5 and 20.3, notably it was atheist and agnostic respondents who fared the best with an average of 20.9; also, interestingly, Christians showed the greatest proficiency on the Bible, while Jews showed particular familiarity with other religions, including Islam.

For the purposes of our current discussion, the survey found that higher levels of education, regular discussion of (and involvement with) religion, and attendance at private rather than public schools were linked to better performance – although no added advantage was attached to *religious* private schooling.

What is clear – including within Western societies, even among those skeptical toward religion, and presumably within other societies characterized by different majority-minority dynamics and different interplay between religion and government – is that more fundamental knowledge, transmitted fairly, compellingly and comprehensively, is needed about our own faith systems and communities. Indeed, it is something to be reinforced that graduation from institutions of higher

[16] September 28, 2010; Washington, DC

learning is popularly called not "conclusion" but "commencement" – signaling that intensive and broad-based learning is not a short-term, passing phase but a lifelong process.

At the same time, it perhaps falls most upon us – those who know and experience the beauty, richness and timelessness of faith – to present faith as positive and edifying in a global marketplace of ideas that not only is crowded and competitive but within which religion is too often seen as the cause of problems, not solutions; division, not unity; and hurt, not healing.

The religious roots that so many see as their own is described in Proverbs as "a tree of life for those who grasp it," whose "ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace."[17] Many religious communities and canons contain elements of extremism or triumphalism. Without sacrificing one's religious integrity and sense of self, it is up to us to stress, in our religious curricula and otherwise, the crucial elements of humility, generosity, compassion and peace.

Indeed, it is up to us to hasten peace through self-reflection – and to erode stereotypes and mistrust of others by eroding ignorance and increasing exposure and empathy. Without a doubt, engagement in a truly inclusive dialogue across communities, nations and cultures is an act of both shared interest and self-interest – comporting well with the teaching: "Who is wise? He who learns from every person."[18]

In a word, the religious values that we must seek to transmit must not only be those that relate to how we serve our God, but also how we care for His creatures, and the global community that we comprise.

After all, we are all children and parents; seekers of truth and meaning; sons and daughters of Adam and Noah; mortals created in the very image of God[19] – He Who commanded: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."[20]

Shukran jazeelan wa'aleikum as'salaam.

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[17] 3:17-18

[18] Chapters of the Fathers 4:1

[19] Genesis 1:26

[20] Leviticus 19:18

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For related statistics, the following two sources are among those recommended:

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North American Jewish Data Bank, http://www.jewishdatabank.org/default.asp