

Foreword

By Dr. Douglas Reeves*

"And these words, which I command you this day, you shall take to heart. Teach them, diligently, to your children, and recite them at home and away, night and day" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

Every word of this document is but a footnote to the foregoing commandment. In the following pages, readers will find a document that draws a line in the sands of time, stating without equivocation that there are essential elements of knowledge and skills that our children must possess. This is not an assemblage of "nice-to-know" information, but rather it represents survival skills for our children. Our most ancient ancestors needed to know not only about fire, water, and cultivation of food, but also about divine instructions for creating a civil society. Today's children need not only the Internet, social connections, and academic proficiency, the fire and sustenance of the twenty-first century, but they, too, need to know the Torah's instructions for maintaining a society that values justice, mercy, and humility.

Having worked in the academic-standards movement on five continents, I am not unaware of the potential controversy that accompanies any document purporting to articulate what students must know and be able to do in order for their education to be regarded a success. After all, given the dramatic differences in standards for mathematics and science from one region of North America to the next, how much less likely is it that people of goodwill can be expected to agree on standards for Tanakh? Therefore, let me offer the reader some respectful advice for approaching this or any other standards document. The test of the following pages is not whether these recommendations meet unanimous approval, for such unanimity is neither the intent of the authors nor a practical possibility. Rather, the test of these standards for Jewish education is whether they can serve to help teachers, school leaders, parents, and students develop meaningful and systematic methods by which they can "take to heart" the teachings of our faith. Five guidelines may be useful as the reader contemplates this document.

First, standards are a floor, not a ceiling. Readers of this document come from varied traditions, including students whose first words were Hebrew and those who did not study Hebrew seriously until the year before their b'nai mitzvah. The purpose of any standards document is not to homogenize students, but to achieve two strikingly different goals: challenge the complacent student and encourage the discouraged student. The standards framework in the following pages will provide a basis from which the novice can enter a serious study of Judaism and find rich and rewarding study without being overwhelmed by complexity and incoherence. These pages will also allow the advanced student to consider challenges that are far beyond merely being "proficient" or "meeting standards." Every teacher who has had more than a single student (and every parent who has more than a single child) knows that the principle of equity is not maintained by treating every child the same, but rather by providing each child with the challenges that meet their individual needs. When standards are implemented effectively, the result is not "standardized" students, but rather young men and women who have been encouraged and challenged.

Second, standards are a moral imperative, not a response to external authority. Secular schools throughout North America have accepted standards, in many cases, as a result of mandates from state,

provincial, or federal authorities. No reform based upon acquiescence and compliance will endure beyond the mandate. As leaders and policies change, so do mandates. The standards in this document, however, are not based upon any secular authority. The moral imperative of standards is as ancient as the moral imperative for fairness. When children are at play, we sometimes hear the plaintive cry, "That's not fair!" Such an outburst is typically the result of rules that were ambiguous or inconsistent. It is instructive for adults to listen as children explain rules of games to one another. They are remarkably precise. "You can do this, but you can't do that. You can go here, but you can't go there. When you do this, you win the game!" Perhaps this is why many children are more engaged on the playground than in the classroom. On the playground, the rules of the games are clear, and students know what they need to do to win. But in too many classrooms, the rules are clouded by ambiguity and mystery. When I ask children why they received a particular mark in school, the most common answer is, with childlike honesty, "I don't know." My research into the relationship between grades and student achievement reveals that in too many cases the relationship between classroom grades and real achievement ranges from negligible to inverse. Every teacher and parent has observed the phenomenon of different students receiving a "B-minus" for four radically different reasons. One child is proficient but lazy, another timely but nonproficient, while another is superb in the subject but displays a poor attitude and work ethic. Parents and children rightly ask the same question, "How did you get that grade?" While standards do not guarantee rationality in grading, the standards-based classroom will, at the very least, provide parents, students, and teachers with clear information with respect to what students know and are able to do. This fundamental level of fairness is not a passing educational fad, but an enduring moral imperative.

Third, standards are motivating for all students. Ask students why one person is successful and another is not, and you are likely to hear, "He's just more clever," or "She is just naturally smart." The implication in these words is that success in school is a matter of innate ability and luck. In the standards-based classroom, however, hard work, rather than talent or luck, is at the root of success. Certainly innate ability, inspiration, and talent are qualities that can be respected. But if we are to motivate the next generation of learners, then they must know that the road from alef-bet to Talmudic insight is not the destination of a single class, but the journey of a lifetime. This journey is not always filled with excitement and immediate gratification. Insights are elusive and the temptation to say, "I just lack the luck, talent, and intelligence to study Torah" is present every time a sacred book is opened. Standards for Judaic study do not demand immediate insight and gratification, but rather they ask for one more letter, one more chapter, one more response, one more authority, and one more reflection. Just as parents and teachers seek to set an example of a journey toward obedience and study, our children and students must also recognize that *tikkun 'olam* is not a multiple-choice test, but the work of a lifetime.

Fourth, standards without rigorous assessment and classroom activities are little more than good intentions. Schools claiming to embrace standards only by posting the "standard of the day" or rewriting lesson plans with a reference to standards documents are elevating documentarianism over student learning. The essential question that every teacher and school leader must ask is this: What are we doing today to help our students leave this school with the knowledge and skills that we have agreed they need? The answer to that question will, over time, change the way that we conduct classes, give feedback to students, and give examinations. Although the publication of this document represents the culmination of a great deal of hard work, it is only the beginning of an endless journey to excellence in Jewish education. The successful implementation of these standards requires that schools devote time for teachers and school leaders to transform lessons that have been influenced over the course of time based on personal preferences into lessons that are consistent, coherent, rigorous, fair, and, most importantly, designed to give students the knowledge and skills required by the standards. I can hear

the reader sigh, "But even if we started today, such a transformation could take five years!" My only gentle rejoinder is, "And where will we be five years from now if we do not begin this transformation today?"

Fifth, standards fundamentally change the way that we evaluate students. The hypercompetitive society in which our children have been raised is dominated by the historically recent notion of the bell curve. When benignly applied to statistical distributions of cattle, plants, and microbes, the bell curve—or normal distribution, as it is more appropriately labeled—can be instructive, though by no means always accurate. But in its early twentieth-century application to student intelligence, the bell curve became a tool of a eugenics movement to prove the superiority and inferiority of races and classes of people. This insidious history alone makes the bell curve inappropriate in any academic context, but particularly loathsome in educational institutions built upon the moral and ethical foundations of Torah. When schools embrace standards, they do not say that one student is proficient because he got 90 percent of the commands correct and his classroom competitor only got 85 percent. Rather, student performance is consistently compared to a standard, not merely to other students. Such a comparison will challenge our students, teachers, and parents, because merely claiming victory over a classmate will be an insufficient basis for academic celebration. The real joy, in a standards-based school, is not from victory over a classmate, but from the genuine achievement of a standard. Our children will reach those goals at different rates and in different ways, but once they achieve them, then our celebrations will be mutual rather than competitive, enduring rather than ephemeral.

To all those who have worked diligently to create these documents, I express my most sincere gratitude and respect. To those who will apply these standards in the pursuit of wisdom, may you find encouragement, patience, and joy as you educate future generations of Jewish children.

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