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David Shatz: Master Teacher Bring Philosophy to Life for Students

A lifelong baseball devotee, David Shatz, PhD, insists that he can root for both the Mets and the Yankees, a notion that befuddles just about every other fan in New York. It's like voting for Nixon and McGovern. It's impossible and irrational. And this man is a philosopher, a master of logic and a defender of reason?

But there's an explanation of sorts. As Dr. Shatz writes in "The Overexamined Life is Not Worth Living," an essay in *God and the Philosophers*, "Hume taught us, in effect, that it is a vice to be too rational, to hold out for rigorous arguments in all walks of life. Only a mad person would want to conduct his or her life with complete Spock-like logicity. We are possessed not of minds alone, but of hearts, emotions, needs, instincts, and habits; and we inhabit social contexts. Obviously, without the use of reason, anarchy enters; still, in most areas of belief and practice, we don't and shouldn't let philosophical worries get to us."

Sounds reasonable. Yet, Dr. Shatz was writing a defense of faith, not a treatise on baseball. Nonetheless, he does have a knack for explaining just about any topic. It's a good thing, for his job is to help students unravel some of the densest material to be found in a college curriculum, from medieval philosophy to theories of the mind to metaphysics. And his students do seem to get it. Indeed, at Stern College for Women, where he is professor of philosophy, he has won the senior class' outstanding professor of the year honor five times. A whole generation of students has been won over by this master teacher, who is at once rigorous and entertaining, erudite and grounded.

"He is one of the most stimulating teachers I've ever had," says Meira Russ '02, a history major who "minored in Dr. Shatz."

"He had taught these courses many times before, but you would never know it from his energy and enthusiasm," she said.

His peers agree. "David Shatz represents a remarkable and very rare combination," remarked Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, dean of the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Institute in Brookline, MA, known to the YU community as the founding editor of the *Torah u-Madda Journal*. "By virtue of his personal behavior and prodigious intellectual accomplishments, he is undoubtedly one of the sharpest, most insightful and most thoughtful representatives and spokesmen for Torah, and lectures on the subject, in all its complexity and multifaceted nature, are models of clear, cogent, and rigorous thinking. "He is also a remarkable mensch, blessed with a real sensitivity to people and a first-rate, quick-witted sense of humor. I know of precious few people who have both these qualities: first-rate intellect and first-rate human decency."

The sacred and the secular

Dr. Shatz, who was born in the Bronx and raised in Monsey, NY, was much like other boys, occupied with hobbies like baseball and comic books. "I didn't bother my parents with big questions," he says. "It was more like, 'Can we go to the ball game?'" Yet he did have a serious side. If he wasn't scrutinizing the latest box scores, he was studying the Talmud or reading history books, curious about the larger world.

The Shatz family returned to the city in 1961, when David was 13, settling on Manhattan's Upper West Side. As luck would have it, the local rabbi was a charismatic young man named Norman Lamm, whose emphasis on both the sacred and the secular would become enormously influential.

Soon, David was off to Yeshiva University, where he would study from high school through graduate school. In college, he concentrated first on mathematics, shifting to the humanities, influenced by a freshman course taught by Leo Taubes, who retired recently after teaching English at YU for 42 years. The young scholar was particularly drawn to philosophy, which integrated his varied interests. "And it fit in well with my Talmudic studies, with deep questions and rigorous thinking," he said. David graduated from YC in 1969, winning honors as the class valedictorian along with a Talmud prize.

Feet firmly planted in two worlds, he spent the next few years studying for the rabbinate at the University-affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), a master's in Jewish philosophy at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, and a master's in general philosophy at New York University. He began teaching college courses at age 23, whetting his appetite for further study and a career in academics.

Next, Dr. Shatz enrolled in a doctoral program in general philosophy at Columbia, earning a PhD with "distinction," an honor awarded to the top 10 percent of dissertations. He also won a prize for best essay in the philosophy of science. His dissertation subject was Knowledge, Reliability, and Justification.

The years at Columbia were critical in shaping Dr. Shatz as a philosopher and as a teacher. One of his professors, Sidney Morgenbesser, was among the most influential philosophers of recent decades, who, said Shatz, maintained "that the rigor and seriousness of philosophy must never crowd out the sheer joy and fun of doing it."

The same could be said for Dr. Shatz, whose sense of humor and ability to bring philosophy to bear on issues in everyday life has endeared him to countless students. "He's a very funny man," said Ms. Russ. "I remember in one class, he broke into a comedy routine," replete with impersonations of famous people.

But his courses are anything but "philosophy-lite."

"He forces you to think," says Ms. Russ. "He expects a lot from his students."

And he gives a lot in return, spending countless hours reviewing papers with students and creating new courses. Over the years, Dr. Shatz has designed 20 different courses, mostly electives in general and Jewish philosophy. In 1997, he was a winner in the international John Templeton Foundation competition for best course design in science and religion.

According to Charles Raffel, PhD, assistant professor of philosophy at Stern, "David is that rare person who is both a respected, world-renowned scholar, and an extraordinarily devoted teacher, dedicated to the craft of teaching."

Competing values

Since joining the YU faculty in 1982, Dr. Shatz' stature has grown in both secular and Jewish studies. His work in general philosophy focuses on the theory of knowledge, free will, ethics, and the philosophy of religion, while his efforts in Jewish philosophy cover Jewish ethics, Maimonides, and 20th-century rabbinic

figures.

An expert in the ethics of medicine and science, he has served on a special committee of the Orthodox Union convened to address the ethics of stem-cell research, and he is currently writing a book on peer review. To date, he has delivered hundreds of lectures, published 50 articles, and edited or coedited seven books, including *Philosophy and Faith: A Philosophy of Religion Reader*; *Definitions and Definability: Philosophical Perspectives*; and *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law*.

He is also editor of the *Torah u-Madda Journal*, where he explores how Torah interfaces with a broad range of fields, from psychology to medicine to law to politics. "Nowadays, when people think of Torah Umadda, they often think Torah and Jewish history and philosophy," he said. "This is certainly an aspect of it, but there is more to Torah Umadda than combining Torah with academic Jewish studies. A good example is the symposium we had on cloning, which played a role in the Orthodox Union's deliberations on stem cell research."

In addition, Dr. Shatz is editor of the *MeOtzar HoRav* series, which publishes manuscripts by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. As a college student, Dr. Shatz was enormously influenced by the Rav as a Talmud teacher, orator, and rabbinic figure. His influence as a philosopher came later, since Rabbi Soloveitchik was more attuned to phenomenology (the study of human consciousness), as it relates to religion, while Dr. Shatz pursued theories of knowledge and the philosophy of science and ethics.

"As the years went on, however, I developed this passion for phenomenology and became fascinated with Rabbi Soloveitchik. It has been a large part of my published work over the past nine years," said the professor, who is the father of two (both of whom went to YU) and grandfather of three.

Dr. Shatz cites the Rav's emphasis on dialectical thinking, "seeing that things are not completely one way or the other. You have to embrace competing perspectives. Rabbi Soloveitchik has brought it into vogue in contemporary times, but it does have old roots. There are certain dialectical tensions in the Bible and the Talmud itself: God is near, God is far; one loves God, one fears God. Those are all part of the religious attitude. Religion requires sometimes conflicting pulls."

This is one of many topics that Dr. Shatz teaches in his courses at YU. But it's not just the subject matter that he hopes to impart to his students. "I want them to walk away with the ability to think deeply, to recognize the difference between rhetorical technique and convincing, logical argument," he said. "And I want them to enjoy the exercise of thinking; thinking is very hard, but the rewards are wonderful."

The subway series

Like all good philosophers, Dr. Shatz likes to put theories to the test, taking them to the philosophical extreme. In fall 2000, during the long-awaited "subway" series between the Yankees and Mets, he had a chance to challenge one of his own deeply held beliefs. With the World Championship on the line, could he still root for both?

I actually rooted for the Yankees, because when push comes to shove..." admitted Professor Shatz, his voice trailing off. Some dialectical tensions are impossible to abide.

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