Two Voices, One Heart: Janusz Korczak & the Piaseczno Rebbe on Children

Objective:

Students will explore and compare the values of two moral leaders—Janusz Korczak and Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (the Piaseczno Rebbe)—focusing on their views of children, education, and moral responsibility.

Part 1: Introduction (5–10 minutes)

Teacher Brief:

- Introduce both figures: (See attached short biographies.)
  - Janusz Korczak: doctor, educator, writer, child rights pioneer.
  - Piaseczno Rebbe: Hasidic leader, spiritual educator, Holocaust martyr.

- Context: Warsaw Ghetto, WWII. Both had opportunities to escape and chose to stay with the children in their care.

Part 2: Quote Comparison (15 minutes)

Theme	Janusz Korczak	Piaseczno Rebbe
Dignity of the Child	"A child is not a future person. A child is a person now..."	"The soul of a Jewish child is a glowing coal..."
The Educator's Role	"You do not leave a sick child alone at night..."	"The educator must look into the heart of each student..."
Love and Patience	"Children need love, especially when they do not deserve it."	"When we pour in warmth, faith, and joy—it overflows."
Response to Suffering	"We are unable to protect them... But we can walk with them."	"Even in the darkness... we cry out not in despair..."

Part 3: Discussion Questions (10–15 minutes)

1. What values do both men share when it comes to children?

2. How do their different backgrounds (secular vs. religious) affect their language or tone?

3. What does it mean to stay with your students or children in a time of danger?

4. What can modern educators or leaders learn from their examples?

Optional Activity: Reflective Writing

Prompt:
Imagine you are a child in the Warsaw Ghetto being cared for by either Korczak or the Rebbe. Write a journal entry about what it feels like to be seen, loved, and taught by someone who believes in you.

Brief Story of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno and His Role in Children's Education:

Rabbi **Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno** (1889–1943), known as the *Piaseczno Rebbe*, was a Hasidic leader, educator, and spiritual teacher in interwar Poland. He was deeply concerned with the moral and spiritual development of Jewish youth, particularly in a time of cultural upheaval and growing secularism. His educational philosophy centered around nurturing the inner spiritual life of children, not just their intellectual or ritual knowledge.

He established a yeshiva in Piaseczno and developed an innovative educational approach that emphasized **personal growth, emotional development, and spiritual experience**. He believed that every child had a divine spark and that education should help uncover and refine that inner holiness. He wrote extensively on education, especially in his book **"Chovas HaTalmidim" (The Student's Obligation)**, which addressed both teachers and students, calling for mutual responsibility, love, and spiritual development.

During the Holocaust, in the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Shapira continued to teach and offer spiritual support to children and youth under unimaginable conditions. He preserved many of his wartime sermons, which were later found buried in milk cans and published as *Aish Kodesh* (Holy Fire), a work of faith and resilience.

He was murdered by the Nazis in 1943, but his writings remain deeply influential in Jewish thought and education.

Three Important Sayings by Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira on Children's Education:

1. **"You must see your students not only as they are but as they can become."**
   — Rabbi Shapira taught that a child's potential is vast and sacred. Education should be a vision of who the student can grow into, not just a reflection of their current state.

2. **"If you want your words to enter a child's heart, you must speak from your own heart."**
   — He emphasized sincerity and emotional connection in teaching. Only heartfelt guidance can truly reach and inspire young people.

3. **"The teacher must work not only to impart knowledge but to awaken the soul."**
   — Rabbi Shapira believed that true education nurtures the whole person — especially the soul — helping children find meaning, purpose, and inner strength.

Brief Story of Janusz Korczak's Life in Relation to Children's Education:

Janusz Korczak (born Henryk Goldszmit, 1878/79–1942) was a Polish-Jewish pediatrician, educator, and children's author who became a pioneer in advocating for children's rights and dignity. Deeply committed to the well-being and education of children, he ran the *Dom Sierot* (Orphan's Home) in Warsaw, where he implemented progressive educational practices. His approach emphasized respect, autonomy, and emotional support for children, treating them as full human beings rather than incomplete adults.

Korczak's educational philosophy was grounded in the belief that children had the right to be heard, to participate in decisions affecting them, and to be treated with respect and fairness. He created democratic structures within the orphanage, including a children's court and parliament, teaching responsibility and empathy through lived experience.

Despite offers of sanctuary during the Holocaust, Korczak refused to abandon the children in his care. In 1942, he accompanied them to the Treblinka extermination camp, where he perished with them, embodying his lifelong commitment to children until the very end.

Three Important Sayings by Janusz Korczak on Children's Education:

1. **"Children are not the people of tomorrow, but people today."**
   — Korczak emphasized that children deserve the same respect as adults, recognizing their feelings, thoughts, and individuality as valid in the present moment.

2. **"You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this."**
   — Spoken when he refused to abandon his orphaned children during Nazi deportations, this reflects his unshakeable sense of responsibility and love for children.

3. **"The child has the right to be himself."**
   — A foundational belief in Korczak's educational philosophy, this saying underlines the importance of nurturing each child's unique personality and voice, rather than molding them into adult expectations.

Korczak's legacy continues to influence child psychology, pedagogy,