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Educating for Jewish Communal Responsibility: Overview

Educating the Children of Prophets

by Sidney Schwarz

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I was raised in a traditional Jewish home, went to a yeshiva for my elementary education years, spent every Shabbat in *shul* and was active in USY. If a national organization were to set out to establish a national commission to look into the challenge facing the field of Jewish education today, my personal profile should be the last one they should invite to join in a focus group that helped to give the commission a sense of direction.

The teenagers that I would bring together in such a commission would come from homes that never saw Shabbat candles lit, where one parent wasn't born as a Jew, where Bar/Bat Mitzvah repre-

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sented a terminal degree (no additional Jewish education necessary). I would seek out the Jewish teens who played on sports teams and hung out in malls, who listened to rap and hip hop and shock jocks. And if we could find a way to make these Jewish kids interested in learning something about Judaism and the Jewish community, teaching the more committed constituency of Jewish kids would be a piece of cake.

I have spent most of my adult life turning these kinds of kids on to Judaism and to being Jewish. I don't underestimate the challenge of reaching the typical American Jewish teen. Nor do I offer an approach that comes with a lifetime, money-back guarantee for success. But I

do know several things about what won't work and what might work. Essentially, it is a matter of changing our pedagogy from one that has long been "inside out" to one that becomes "outside in."

Jewish education that is "inside out" begins with an assumption that the young people sitting in front of the teacher have a predisposition to being committed Jews. If that were true, then an education that transmitted the language, history, culture, customs, values and precepts of the Jewish tradition would both be expected and have a fairly high chance of being well received. The students (as well as the families from which they came) would want to acquire the basic knowledge and competencies necessary to be knowledgeable and committed Jews. Indeed, to the extent that most Jewish families want their children to pass through a Bar/Bat Mitzvah rite of passage, there is some nominal commitment to fulfilling that which a synagogue sets as a minimum standard to qualify for that privilege. It also explains why upwards of 80% of Jewish children receive some form of Jewish education. They are in it for the holy grail of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Look at the same pool of students in the years following Bar/Bat Mitzvah and we see a very different picture. Without the incentive of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, enrollment rates plummet with each passing year of high school. Just as these students begin to achieve some intellectual maturity and begin to seriously grapple with questions of identity and individuation (who am I, apart from the identity imprint given to me by my parents?), they receive little to no exposure to Jewish education. It is left to Jewish youth movements, summer camps, Israel trips, and special retreats and seminars to make some impact on these adolescents, in the hope that they positively identify as Jews when they become adults.

It is precisely at this stage of their lives that education needs to be "outside in." Begin with the interests and concerns of the students, assuming no prior commit-

ment to Jewish identity. The Jewish educational work that we have pioneered under the auspices of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values takes just such an approach. Because teenagers are eager to inhabit a larger and more universal world than the one that is typified by their home, synagogue, and schools, our starting point is the issues that affect society and the world at large — poverty, the environment, civil liberties, human rights, religion and state, the use and abuse of power, etc. We call it Jewish civic education.

THE GOALS OF JEWISH CIVIC EDUCATION

What is the goal of Jewish civic education? First, it is the task of telling the Jewish story. This amounts to much more than teaching Jewish history. It is the story of Jewish commitment to the well-being of fellow Jews around the world and of the Jewish commitment to social justice for all of humanity. It is the story of how a community that was powerless to help European Jews during the Holocaust became, in a relatively short period of time, the most politically sophisticated sub-community in America. It is appreciating the galaxy of Jewish organizations that form an international polity, acting on behalf of the welfare and safety of the Jewish people as well as on a commitment to create a better world for all of God's children.

Serious teaching of Jewish civics also requires an examination of how the classical texts of the Jewish tradition have served as the foundation for a values orientation that can help us think about the "Jewish way" to engage in issues of social justice. A people which understands the significance of the teaching that human beings are created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of God, cannot function in the political realm with a sole focus on group self-interest and self-preservation.

We teach young Jews not only to take in this story; we also charge them to live

up to the legacy. Part of our success with the thousands of students who have passed through our various programs (e.g., *Panim el Panim*: High School in Washington, the Jewish Civics Initiative, and the E Pluribus Unum Project) is the fact that we convey the message that we believe in their ability to be agents for positive social change. We tap into a deep well of altruism that is the most precious gift of youth. In a society that so quickly turns idealism into cynicism, Jewish education needs to nurture the best in us. But there is more. I am convinced that even the most disconnected young Jews are predisposed to a message that calls on them to live up to the legacy of our Biblical prophets. Maybe it is ethnic acculturation; maybe it is latent historical consciousness; maybe it is genetic coding. All I know is that any form of Jewish education must capitalize on this inclination.

One key way to do this is to cultivate in young Jews a sense of civic responsibility to the issues and institutions that occupy the American public square. While this case can be made on the basis of American citizenship, there is also a clear mandate for such civic duty from the sacred texts and historical experience of the Jewish people. An even greater challenge, however, is to combine passionate involvement with American society and politics with ongoing reverence for the Jewish tradition and commitment to the Jewish community. The goal is for a young person to walk away with an understanding that to be a Jew is tantamount to being a citizen of the Jewish people.

There are those who will say that this is all well and good but that civic engagement, commitment to the work of *tikkun olum*, and involvement in the social and

political issues of society is not the totality of Jewish education. I agree. There is Bible, Talmud and *midrash*. There is history, philosophy and *musar* (ethical writings). There is language, music and literature. There is prayer, holidays, customs and ceremonies. For the pool of young people who are open to learning about our tradition from the inside out, the question remains "what is it all for?" There is the danger, identified by many of our sages, of missing the forest for the trees.

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Nachmanides spoke of the possibility of being a "*navale birshut ha-torah*," "a scoundrel within the parameters of Torah." In other words, a person who is punctilious about the observance of the specifics of Jewish law but who fails to be a *mensch*. The Rav, Joseph Soloveichik, was wary of the same pitfall when he said, "The password of the Jewish people is *chesed*, compassion, both toward other Jews and to all of humanity." Connecting the values and traditions of the Jewish tradition with good works in the world is the way committed Jews come to some clarity about the very purpose of living a Jewish life.

For the pool of young people who are less inclined to the Jewish tradition, we must give them a reason why a three thousand year old heritage matters. Many are the Jews who are inclined to engage in a

multitude of good causes in the world. Few connect those acts to Judaism. Missing in their nominal experiences with Jewish education was that which ties their instincts for justice with their Jewish identity. As a result, many of the people doing the most significant work for peace and justice in the world are Jews with little or no connection to Judaism or the Jewish community.

THREE CRITICAL LESSONS

All of which brings us back to Jewish civic education. I would suggest three critical lessons that would help to encourage Jews to live out the legacy of the prophetic tradition and to allow them to identify such action in the world with their Jewish identity.

First is to highlight at every stage of Jewish education the threads of justice that serves as a central theme of Torah. Whether it is the admonition to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (*Lev. 19:18*), to leave the corners of one's field for the poor (*Lev. 19:9*), or to "seek peace and pursue it" (*Psalms 34:15*), Jews need to have their awareness raised about the fact that many of the key principles of social welfare emanate from the book to which our ancestors covenanted at Sinai.

Second is the lesson of history. We read in *Exodus 23:9*, "you shall not oppress the stranger ... because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The verse has resonance for almost every generation of Jews to live since the enslavement in Egypt, for many are the times and places that Jews were the most vulnerable victims of society. It explains why the protection of the stranger (*ahavat ger*) is the most oft-repeated commandment in the Bible (appearing 36 times). It also explains why it is that Jews so often ally themselves with those in society who are the most marginalized, underprivileged and oppressed.

Third and finally is the responsibility of privilege. This relates both to our personal circumstances and that of our community. As individuals, Jews are among the highest earners and most accomplished in American society. Our tradition of *tzedakah* reminds us of the obligation to share of our bounty with those less fortunate because the measure of our worth

is based not on what we have, but on what we give. The same is true of our community.

In the recent past, the Jewish community had a very real taste of political powerlessness as we found ourselves unable to persuade nations to come to the aid of European Jewry during the Holocaust. But since the end of the war, the Jewish community has become among the most politically active and astute sub-groups that America has ever seen. The community's first priority was to insure the security and survival of Jews at home and abroad and we did this with admirable effectiveness. But to our community's credit, we have also worked for greater social and economic equality, sought to improve public education, worked for affordable health care, protected the environment, and waged campaigns for human rights and civil liberties; the list goes on. The community has lived out Hillel's maxim: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what am I?"

This mandate for Jewish education, which works from the outside in, is not about substituting support for People for the American Way with Jewish learning and observance. It is about seeing to it that our study leads to action, just as Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Tarfon agree that it must in a famous debate in the Talmud (*Kiddushin 40b*.) Yes, our kids may hang out in malls, listen to hip hop and shock jocks, and identify more strongly with sports heroes and movie stars than with the sages of the Jewish tradition. But they are also the children of prophets named Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos. Given the right approach, our children will show us new ways to live out the prophetic legacy of Judaism in the 21st century. ■

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