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Introducing More Jewish Human Beings to the Conversation In Word and Deed about the Covenant

I made the mistake, before sitting down to gather my thoughts for this presentation, of reading the ideas that I shared at a parallel retreat that the JFF Board held with *madrichim* six years ago. It was an honor to be included then, as I completed my stint as a Stanford professor and looked forward to the move to JTS, and it is a still greater honor to be included again, as I enter my sixth year of work with faculty and staff on the often-humbling effort to translate my convictions about Judaism, Jewish education and the Jewish community into institutional programs, priorities and budgets. My problem with what I wrote in 2006 is not that my analysis was wrong. I believe in all humility that my pictures of “the modern Jewish situation” and “the challenges we face now” were pretty much on target. The “modest” proposal I put forward for transforming congregational schools from top to bottom will soon be declared a major pillar of my JTS agenda for the next five years. The problem is the opposite: everything that seemed true to me about our community in 2006 seems all the more true in 2012. What seemed important then seems urgent today. Things have moved even faster than any of us could have predicted, and not only in the area of technology. Despite significant advances in Jewish education during this period, the direction in which many things are moving is not positive. On the other hand we must never forget that great opportunities beckon right now through windows that soon may close. My analysis in 2006, therefore, strikes me in hindsight as not far-reaching enough. My proposals for change were in several key respects insufficiently radical.

This think-piece bears the imprint of the satisfactions and frustrations of the five years I have spent leading JTS. It has been shaped as well by several recent developments: the population study of New York Jewry released last Spring; an AJC consultation last Fall about the continuing (and perhaps growing) divide between Israeli and American Jews that especially affects younger members of our community; my steep learning curve over the last 18 months about the technological revolution sweeping higher (and other) education; and, perhaps most important, my felt need, as the leader of JTS and one of the leaders of Conservative Judaism and of the wider swath of Jews that I call the “Vital Religious Center,” to be utterly clear on what I truly believe about Judaism and the Jewish people and to articulate those convictions as widely as possible. With your permission, I will begin this essay from core commitments (rather than with a survey of the contemporary situation in Jewish education) and work outwards. In the 2006 document I called this personal center of gravity Torah. Here I shall call it covenant.

Several weeks ago, on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana, we read Parashat *Nitzavim* as we do every year in the lead-up to High Holy Days. Moses gives the climactic speech of his life to the Children of Israel in a way that I believe addresses me, addresses all of us, directly. “You are standing here this day,” he says – and he is right: we are, if we elect to place ourselves among his audience. I feel included in his second-person-plural “you”. Moses at once emphasizes just how inclusive this group is, encompassing “even the stranger within your camp.” The covenant is made “both with those who are standing here this day before the Lord...and with those who are not with us here this day.” I feel these words viscerally. I believe that when you or I take on the responsibilities of this covenant as contemporary Jew, however we choose to do so, our ancestors stand with us. If we live Judaism actively we live with the generations by our side– and in a real sense we also live for them. It goes without saying that Jews of past generations might not recognize their Jewish way in ours. My Dad never touched a computer keyboard, let alone a smart

phone. His father, who worked as a tailor, lacked extensive Jewish or general education. Their ways of living Judaism were very different from one another and cannot possibly be the same as mine. And yet they are! I know for certain that substantial continuity connects them with me – especially at holidays - and I know too that I live Judaism for and with my descendants. All of us do. Someday in the distant future Jews of multiple varieties will live Judaism with and for us.

My ability to take on this gift with a full heart, joyfully, holding nothing back, sacrificing nothing of my modern American self to Judaism but rather bringing all I have and all I am to the task of covenant, is heightened by three further assurances that Moses provides in Parashat *Nitzavim*. (1) Much that we would dearly love to know about life, death and the future is “concealed.” We will never know it. No theology or system will ever prove adequate. But the “revealed things” are sufficient for us and our children to do what is needed. We can make the world more just and compassionate, as the covenant requires. We have enough to go on, in both senses. (2) The wisdom we require is not in heaven, not across the sea, but here, close, in our mouth and heart. We have what we need: a wonderfully expansive tradition; the use of all human faculties and the gifts of science and culture they have produced over the centuries; the help of one another and the sum total of our diverse experiences and wisdom; the help of God, always imperfectly and variously understood. (3) We can figure out what we need to do and can do it, with some success; we can and do choose life, choose good, and choose blessing. That agenda is not captured by the word “religion.” It is certainly not “secular.”

Five action-principles for Jewish educational flow directly from this statement of core convictions. I name them here and attach each to one key element of transformed practice.

1. **The existence of Jews committed to the task of carrying on the covenant remains urgently important for the world as well as for Judaism. Every Jew matters.** This means that our educational net should be cast as widely as possible. We should not address only “core Jews,” even as we continue to serve the needs of that essential set of partners and leaders in the conversation. JJF is right to try and meet a broad array of Jews where they are and help them pursue differing paths of covenant that bind them, as the original does, to one another and to the world as well as to God/The Ultimate/Transcendence. The NYC population study, which revealed huge growth among Haredim and a shrinking percentage of non-Orthodox Jews, also highlighted the wide diversity of the city’s Jewry. This variety on the one hand makes it impossible to reach all Jews with a single religious, cultural, or political message and on the other makes it more important than ever to reach across the growing Orthodox/non-Orthodox divide. Providing large numbers of Jews with diverse forms of Jewish education has become more complex and difficult with each passing year -- and more necessary. This is arguably true in many sectors of life and many industries.
2. **The fundamental task of Jewish education is to bring ever more Jewish men and women – especially in the period of adolescence and emerging adulthood when self-conceptions and key relationships are formed – into Jewish *conversation*, conducted across the ages in word and deed, about how to pursue the covenant.** That is why I proposed in my op-ed piece in Wall Street Journal this summer, drawing upon an earlier idea from Lee Shulman, that we develop a new sort of *dafyomi* – far broader in content, media, scope and range of participants than the Orthodox original – that will link as many members and segments of the Jewish community as possible in daily learning and conversation. We want to create experiences of meaning and community shared as widely as can be and yet as intimate as can be. New technology is very much our ally in pursuing this eternal covenantal task.

3. **Moses' call addresses every Jew who is prepared to heed it, regardless of denomination, gender or creed; indeed, it addresses every human being who is ready to listen and to cooperate with Jews in carrying out the task Moses sets forth. Jewish education needs to be equally universal in its scope and its conception of the self.** We tend for obvious reasons – funding, mission, habit – to conceive Jewish education as education of Jews about Judaism. It makes perfect sense, except that - outside of the Haredi world - few of us live as Jews only. We are not meant to live that way. The Torah wants Jewish human beings who engage as such with the world. The Jewish parts of us are not separate from the rest of who we are. I believe Jewish leaders have made a mistake in acceding to the modern Enlightenment division between “secular” and “religious,” allowing these specious categories to define Jews and limit Jewish education. I'd like to see educational programs that work to overcome that divide and offer curricular experiences that address multiple parts of the self. Link the study and practice of Jewish tradition to experience of tradition per se (*e.g.* in the arts). Tie ritual observance to familiar disciplines such as sports and music lessons. Relate Torah and Talmud to personal and social ethics. Do this not as educational gimmick but because this is who we are and how we learn. (Think of summer camps. See the Cohen-Kelman study on how young Jews want to experience Jewish culture.) In sum: Address Jewish human beings in every program, not Jews. The implications are far-reaching.
4. **Because nothing worthwhile is accomplished without effort, and no human achievement comes without study and practice, even the least knowledgeable Jew can understand that Jewish life too depends on learning. Substance is essential. And because “Jewish human being” is who we are or want to be rather than a hobby or career for which we prepare, Jewish education is not a component added to Jewish life, one among many things Jews do, but rather its core.** We have understood for some time that in contemporary North America, where all doors are open to Jews and few Jews live in an exclusively Jewish world, Jewish education means acculturation and socialization – becoming part of the community and its conversation – rather than acquisition of discrete skills and knowledge. Substance is not the enemy of that wide-ranging effort at offering experiences of meaning and community. It is essential. New technologies are leading every form of education today to stress relationship, experience and learning as tool for personal growth -- changing the nature of classrooms, libraries, textbooks and professions. This shift should help us immensely.
5. **The diversity of the Jewish community can prove a resource for Jewish life and a boon to Jewish education if we find a way – I think we can – of aiming at substance and solidarity rather than at mere commonalty or unity. The goal should be cooperation and dialogue rather than uniformity,** which is too often purchased at the expense of valuable differences. Jews of course cannot and will not agree on how to pursue the Covenant or, indeed, on who should be included in the group charged with doing so. This is a given. But if we take seriously the requirement that the Jewish people must exist and be vital (“*Am Yisrael Chai*”); if we agree on the impossibility of knowing the ultimate truth about God or God's will; and if we accept the mandate to bring passion, learning and commitment to the choice for goodness and blessing -- it seems to me that our educational efforts should simultaneously pursue three tracks.
 - (a) Preserve distinctions that matter. We should not all study or pray the same way. Denominational differences are well worth preserving. The whole is strengthened when the parts are vibrant.
 - (b) Agree that the “default” position is cooperation. Whatever educational resources can be shared should be shared, including educational professionals, whether in day schools,

synagogue schools, youth groups or camps. Do not assume that Orthodoxy must remain separate in all respects. The opposite is the case.

- (c) Commit ourselves to making sure that as many Jewish teens and young adult as possible learn about other kinds of Jews and how they see the world, preferably by knowing and working with them. (Sadly, I have no Haredi friends or colleagues.) We all need the challenges – and sense of shared Covenant - that other Jews bring to our taken-for-granted assumptions. In particular, we should try in the next few years to reach over the growing divides separating Israeli from North American Jews, Orthodox from non-Orthodox, and in-married from inter-married. Interfaith partnerships provide a good model for linking Jews with Jews.

Conclusion

I feel compelled to add, despite having already exceeded the recommended length of this thought-piece, that I approach the tasks I have suggested to us with excitement rather than fear, with a keen sense of opportunity rather than of crisis, and most of all with gratitude for the chance to live Jewishly in this, the most fortunate Diaspora that Jews have ever known, standing alongside a reborn State of Israel. I am worried about Iranian nuclear weapons as I set down these thoughts at Sukkot 5773 for the Shimon ben Joseph Foundation, but I am not worried about the disappearance of the Jewish people or of Judaism, or even about an end to vibrant Jewish life in North America. We do not need to engage every single Jewish human being in the Covenant for it to continue – though we are obliged to try. The issue is rather maintaining the critical mass needed to keep our institutions and communities vital. I, like you, feel an immense obligation to share the profundity and joy of Jewish living with more Jews, especially younger Jews. Being able to do so is a great gift. Moses at the end of his life was not permitted to be optimistic about his people's future in the near-term. I am – in large part because this group and others like it will gather in 2012 to discuss an agenda for Jewish education that we have the will, the imagination and the means to pursue devotedly.