

## **From Silver Bullet to a Golden Theory: New Educational Aims for Jewish Emerging Adults**

The recent Pew report, *A Portrait of American Jews*, documents extraordinarily high rates of intermarriage among large segments of the American Jewish population.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this finding looms a mounting body of literature demonstrating the deleterious effects of intermarriage on Jewish continuity and cultural vitality.<sup>2</sup> Given these poor vital signs for the long-term health of the American Jewish community, what kind of policies can be imagined to rectify the situation? This paper will consider this larger question by focusing on educational approaches to serve emerging adults, those young people aged 18-29.<sup>3</sup> After briefly noting the American Jewish community's instinctive linkage of education and continuity, I shall call our attention to one area of educational reform, the study of vision-guided education. Drawing on this model, I shall then offer a vision of Jewish education for emerging adults in the United States that emphasizes the core ideals of historical-familism and covenant. Finally, I shall make two policy recommendations based on this discussion.

### **I. Education and Intermarriage**

The American Jewish community has long viewed education, broadly construed, as a fitting approach to address the threat of intermarriage. Nearly a quarter century ago, when the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) ignited a public firestorm about Jewish continuity in the United States, a blue ribbon committee of philanthropists, scholars, and communal leaders convened under the aegis of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America. They concluded:

Over the last several decades, intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews has risen dramatically, and a major proportion of children of such marriages no longer identify themselves as Jews... The responsibility for developing Jewish identity and instilling a commitment to Judaism for this population now rests primarily with education.<sup>4</sup>

The linkage of continuity and education carried over from the sphere of Jewish communal life into more academic circles as well. Philosophers of education as illustrious as Israel Scheffler would write: "The question of linking education with

---

<sup>1</sup> "A Portrait of American Jews: Findings from a Pew Research Survey of U.S. Jews." Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Steven M. *A Tale of Two Jewries: The "Inconvenient Truth" for American Jews*. Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life. November 2006: <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=2908>

<sup>3</sup> On the term "emerging adults" see Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner. *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. Decade of Behavior. 1st ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *A Time to Act - The Report of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America*. Mandel Foundation, University Press of America. November 1990, p. 15. Hereafter, *A Time to Act*.

continuity in this special sense is no longer trivial but momentous.”<sup>5</sup>

Since then, hundreds of millions of dollars have been poured into the education of Jewish emerging adults. Hillels, Birthright Trips, Moishe Houses, and a variety of other programs have blossomed. But for all of this investment, the demographic forecast remains bleak. Indeed, the Pew report details a markedly higher rate of intermarriage among those married since 2000. It seems upwards of 70% of non-Orthodox Jews in the United States will intermarry if current trends continue unabated. What type of educational activities might produce better results?

## II. Educational Vision and Emerging Adults: The Path Not Taken

Over the last 20 years, a small but vociferous cadre of scholars has argued that Jewish educational reform would benefit from an articulation of its ultimate aims.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by the work of Seymour Fox and the Visions of Jewish Education Project at the Mandel Institute, these scholars challenge Jewish communal leaders to articulate an “*existential vision...a conception of Jewish life at its best*” as well as “an “*educational vision,*” defined as “*a thick conception of the entirety of the educational process that is organized around an existential vision.*”<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge there has not been a clear, detailed, or serious educational vision articulated for Jewish emerging adults in the United States. Instead, educational programming has been guided by three alternative approaches none of which have yielded the desired results. These are: slogans, pedagogy, and the discourse of identity.

Slogans are sayings that are “unsystematic, popular, and usually intended to elicit emotions rather than to induce pondering.”<sup>8</sup> An example would be “Maximizing the number of Jews doing Jewish with other Jews,” which for a number of years was the “sacred mission” of Hillel.<sup>9</sup> This sentence is vague at best but conveys a feeling of purpose, growth and unity. Pedagogy describes the method or set of techniques used to teach. Each year it seems a new way to instruct young Jews finds an evangelist in the American Jewish community. These sundry methods run the gamut from bibliodrama to farming, from online apps to experiential education. While each discrete pedagogy might be valuable, it is difficult to build policy around technique. A more coherent vision of educational aims is required. I recall one year attending a General Assembly of Jewish Federations and witnessing the unveiling of “Punk Torah,” as the latest pedagogy to reach emerging adults.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps “Punk Torah” is an effective program or pedagogy, but without a guiding vision we will never know.

Finally, in academic and communal circles alike we can point to the discourse of “Jewish identity” as an alternative to vision. Among scholars, much ink has been spilled

---

<sup>5</sup> Fox, Seymour. Scheffler, Israel. *Jewish Education and Jewish Continuity: Prospects and Limitations*. Mandel Foundation. 2000, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> For a review of this literature see See Daniel Pekarsky, “Visions in Jewish Education” in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*. International Handbooks of Religion and Education. 1st ed. New York: Springer, 2011, p. 319-333.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 319. Italics in original.

<sup>8</sup> Barry Chazan, “Analytic Philosophy of Education and Jewish Education: The Road Not Taken” in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*. International Handbooks of Religion and Education. 1st ed. New York: Springer, 2011, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Reimer, Joseph. “Beyond More Jews Doing Jewish: Clarifying the Goals of Informal Jewish Education.” *Journal for Jewish Education* 73 (2007): 5-23.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://punktorah.org>.

in the last two decades analyzing, probing, and documenting Jewish identity. Steven Cohen seems correct, however, when he describes this line of inquiry as “too individualist,” eschewing the collective nature of Judaism.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Marshall Sklare astutely noted, Judaism is a “sacramental religion” historically emphasizing behavior and practice.<sup>12</sup> The discourse of identity, by contrast, draws from social psychology and places greater emphasis on attitudes.

In Jewish communal life, the conversation about Jewish identity seems to suffer from a fundamental, but unarticulated, misconception about human behavior. It is widely assumed that a robust “Jewish identity” will yield specific, Jewish behaviors, such as in-marriage and affiliation. There seems to be a gap in the logic, or what we might call a faulty theory of action. Increasingly, we are learning that the attitudes and beliefs that make up much of what constitutes Jewish identity discourse are not as influential in determining human behavior as we might have thought. Rather, as I will show in the next section of this essay, much empirical research indicates that if it is behavior (such as marriage partners) that one wishes to modify, personal influence from social networks, communities, and mentors plays a much stronger role than any slogan, pedagogy, program, or identity conversation. Yet these continue to occupy the public conversation. What would it look like to offer a vision of Jewish education that properly emphasized the social dimension of decision making instead? In the following section of this essay I will try to do just that.

### **III. A Vision for Jewish Emerging Adults**

I would suggest 7 educational aims that we should nurture among Jews 18-29 in the United States.

1. A Jewish Social Group
2. A Jewish Mentor
3. Jewish Communal Participation (beyond the immediate social group)
4. A Deep Encounter with Jewish Otherness
5. A Commitment to the Study of Torah
6. Living the Jewish Calendar
7. An Orientation toward Judaism as Service rather than Consumption.

Allow me to explain the thinking behind these ideas and some policies that might flow from them.

#### **Background: American Judaism**

Judaism in the United States can best be described not as a nation, race, religion, or ethnicity, though it might function as any of these things. Rather, Judaism is best described as an historical family with a covenant. “Historical-familism” is a term that Charles Liebman and Steven Cohen coined to describe the “ethnic based solidarity” they detected among American and Israeli Jews.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Steven M. Cohen. "Jewish Identity Research in the United States: Ruminations on Concepts and Findings." In *Continuity, Commitment and Survival*: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall Sklare. *Conservative Judaism; an American Religious Movement*. New augm. ed. New York,: Schocken Books, 1972.

Drawing on Anthony Smith's understanding of ethnic groups, Cohen and Liebman assert that Jews, "betray a quasi-familial sentiment; even though the ethnic community subsumes many families and clans, it is, in the first place, an aggregate of such families and clans."<sup>14</sup> The notion of a family-based ethnicity carries with it powerful moral claims. First, "is that of ascription: a family is a group into which a person is born and which the person remains part regardless of what he or she does." Families lay claim to our sense of self that is prior to our own choices. Second, family communicates "a sense of mutual responsibility: the members of a family care about each other. These feelings are suffused with a sense of compulsion, obligation, and permanence." The adjective "historical" implies this kinship group imagines itself to transcend the present generations to reach into a much larger timeframe of history. Whether or not this is empirically true is irrelevant. The ethnic family maintains myths, stories, and rituals that perpetuate a sense of both memory and history.

Covenant refers to the idea that our historical family has long believed that it maintains an obligating relationship with each other and with God, enacted through commandments, reinterpreted in each generation. The meaning of our covenant can and should be continually revisited. Such interpretations could span the gamut of approaches from strict Orthodoxy to a more individualist Reform to a secularist approach that argues that the covenant is a thing of the past. I prefer the term covenant for several reasons. First, covenant is a larger category than law, ritual or custom. It bespeaks the total relationship among Jews and between Jews and God. Second, covenant is flexible enough to function as a legal category and a theological one. The same cannot be as easily said of, say, "spirituality." Finally, covenant has been the site of a great deal of scholarship for all the modern Jewish denominations. It can be understood as the "native language" of Reform and Orthodox Jews.<sup>15</sup>

For much of the twentieth century America Judaism functioned as an ethnicity cloaked in religious garb.<sup>16</sup> The majority of Jewish immigrants to the United States whose descendants make up the bulk of our community today were not deeply "religious" in the conventional sense. Rather, they were people that lived with, worked with, befriended, and loved other Jews. They were Jews by ethnicity who practice *yiddishkeit* more than *yahadut*. The United States has long been deeply tolerant of religious difference, but more suspicious of ethnic distinctiveness. It is easier to justify a "Catholic school" than an "Italian School." Jews learned to use religious institutions as

---

<sup>14</sup> Charles S. Liebman, and Steven Martin Cohen. *Two Worlds of Judaism : The Israeli and American Experiences*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. 13. These terms are drawn from Anthony Smith's "Ethnic Identity and World Order." *Millennium* 12, no. April (1983): 149-61.

<sup>15</sup> The examples of covenantal theology abound. Three major works are David Hartman's . *A Living Covenant : The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism*. 1st paperback ed. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1998, Eugene B Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant : A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991; and Irving Greenberg's, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth : The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004. Arnold M. Eisen also used covenantal theology extensively in his *Taking Hold of Torah : Jewish Commitment and Community in America*. The Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Jewish Studies. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> This analysis follows the argument put forward by Charles Liebman in his discussion of the work of Marshall Sklare. See Charles S. Liebman, *Jewish Identity in the United States: Unraveling the Ethnic-Religious Package*. *The Collected Speeches of Charles S. Liebman*. Charles S. Liebman. January 2002: <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=8029>

centers for the practice of ethnic behavior in the United States. People attended synagogues and gave to Jewish causes not only out of religious conviction, but because this was a culturally acceptable way to practice historical-familism, to be “ethnic” in the United States. Think of the most important space in the large suburban temple, the social hall. This speaks to the primacy of the social interaction over the prayer space in communal institutions.

Today, the two biggest challenges facing Judaism in the United States are the porousness of American social boundaries and a consumer-oriented marketplace that touches every facet of daily life. These are seen most acutely among Jewish emerging adults. Ironically, surviving as a distinctive group, an historical family with a covenant, is much harder in a fluid, open society than in a society with tightly sealed boundaries. When the ghettos walls are up, its hard to *not* be Jewish by default. In America, where those walls are long gone, our challenge is to maintain group distinctiveness in a society that prioritizes mixing. Moreover, the consumer marketplace works to undermine the sense of communal obligation, focusing instead on the individual’s choice and desire. Such a market place erodes those goods that cannot be justified by the utilitarian language of need or taste.

### **Jewish Emerging Adults**

Most non-orthodox young Jews today have one Jewish parent, not two. Most have little significant Jewish education. Most will lessen if not entirely cease their Jewish observance by the time they leave college. We face a crisis of continuity and cultural vitality. Its not just that we worry if this generation of Jews will continue to produce other Jews, but we worry about the thinness of the Judaism they will create.

The first four of the seven educational aims listed above therefore seek to bolster the social and ethnic basis of Judaism, to bring people into a deeper sense of historical family (1-4). The latter three will focus on the ritual and symbolic components that lead to Jewish cultural vitality. Below is an explication of each one.

#### **1. A Jewish Social Network**

Recently, scholars have documented the profound effect of social networks on human behavior.<sup>17</sup> Smoking, for instance, can be strongly correlated to whether one’s friends smoke.<sup>18</sup> Obesity and weight loss are deeply influenced by who makes up one’s immediate friendship circle, and even secondary friendship group.<sup>19</sup> In these cases, one does not lose weight because a compelling case for health was made. Rather, one loses weight because one is subtly influenced by a group of people. In a social context, millions of small choices are unconsciously recorded, symbolic actions take on greater resonance, and a kind of collective unconsciousness can emerge.

---

<sup>17</sup>Charles Kadushin. *Understanding Social Networks : Theories, Concepts, and Findings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas A. Cristakis, and James H. Fowler. "The Collective Dynamics of Smoking in a Large Social Network." *New England Journal of Medicine* 358.21 (2008): 2249-258.

<sup>19</sup> See J. H. Fowler, and N. A. Christakis, "Estimating Peer Effects on Health in Social Networks: A Response to Cohen-Cole and Fletcher; and Trogdon, Nonnemaker, and Pais." *J Health Econ* 27, no. 5 (Sep 2008): 1400-5 and A. J. O'Malley, and N. A. Christakis. "Longitudinal Analysis of Large Social Networks: Estimating the Effect of Health Traits on Changes in Friendship Ties." *Stat Med* 30, no. 9 (Apr 30 2011): 950-64.

In Jewish educational settings, social networks are only beginning to be understood. In 2006, Leonard Saxe and Amy Sales concluded, “dense Jewish social networks are strongly related to students’ engagement in formal Jewish life on campus and involvement as Jewish leaders.”<sup>20</sup> Steven Cohen and Judith Veinstein studied the impact of Jewish social networks and Jewish education on adult Jewish practices. They found that “childhood social networks are linked with expressions of adult Jewish identity... [T]hose raised by two Jewish parents and who had mostly Jewish friends in high school received the highest adult Jewish identity scores on every measure.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, “having Jewish friends (and parents) in the childhood years matters especially for having Jewish friends later in life, and to a lesser extent, for in-marriage, and for all other measures of Jewish identity.”<sup>22</sup> In yet another case, Cohen and Ari Kelman correlate friendship groups and in-marriage to connectedness to Israel.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, fewer Jewish friends and a non-Jewish spouse or partner yields increased “distancing” from Israel. The makeup of our friendship circles influences our participation in Jewish life, whom we marry, and how we feel about Israel more than we might have previously recognized.

These findings confirm my own anecdotal experience and that of my colleagues who work as educators serving Jewish emerging adults. The single greatest predictor of participation in Jewish life on college campuses is the extent of one’s Jewish social group. One who has Jewish friends will be far more likely to come to a Shabbat dinner, attend a service, participate in a Hillel program in the much same way one who has friends who smoke is more likely to smoke. It seems reasonable to assume that if we wish to see significant changes in intermarriage rates, a necessary goal of Jewish educational work with emerging adults must be the conscious cultivation of friendship groups. If we work with emerging adults and they are inspired, informed, and impressed with our ideas but have no Jewish friends, we have most likely failed them. They are at a disadvantage for living a Jewishly committed life.

## **2. A Jewish Mentor**

The power and impact of mentors on emerging adults has been well documented in a variety of literatures. Mentors can inspire learning, provide emotional and spiritual support, offer a space for reflection, and exemplify a model of life lived well to their younger mentees.<sup>24</sup> Empirical studies have connected mentorship with the development

---

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Saxe and Amy L. Sales. *Particularism In The University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus*. Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS),Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life. January 2006.

p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Steven M. Cohen and Judith Veinstein. "Jewish Identity: Who You Knew Affects How You Jew—the Impact of Jewish Networks in Childhood Upon Adult Jewish Identity." In *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, 203-18: Springer, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> See Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman. *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*. Jewish Identity Project of Reboot. 2007; and Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman. *Thinking about Distancing from Israel*. *Contemporary Jewry*. Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ). October 2010.

<sup>24</sup> See Laurent A. Daloz. *Mentor : Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners*. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999 and Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams : Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. Rev. ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.



of resilience and with career advancement.<sup>25</sup> If networks are the wide social contexts which shape our behavior, mentoring relationships are those circumscribed, individual, deep relationships that have disproportionate impact on our life decisions. Mentorship is not well studied among Jewish emerging adults.<sup>26</sup> Given the powerful role mentors play in shaping the behavior of emerging adults across such a wide variety of contexts, it stands to reason the same could be true for Jewish emerging adults. I would add that mentors also serve as examples of a particular way of life. Anecdotally, those who work on campus in the Orthodox rabbinate understand the educative value of a married couple. They recognize that presenting college students with a living, breathing example of marriage makes marriage a live option in a way that an unwanted piece of advice from nagging parents never will. The presence of such couples in the form of the Orthodox Union's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC), for example, might explain, in part, the earlier marriage horizons found among Orthodox emerging adults.

### **3. Jewish Communal Participation (beyond the immediate social group)**

Friends and mentors are powerful personal influences on a young person's behavior. Emerging adults, however, live in a highly mobile universe. They travel from city to city, often changing residences with every year. Communal participation refers to a set of behaviors that place one within a collective beyond the immediate social group. An example would be attending an Israel day parade, participating in a Super Sunday telethon, joining a synagogue, attending a shiva or *simcha* of an acquaintance. All of these behaviors testify to one's identification with a collective that is beyond the reach of friendship. It bespeaks a felt obligation, greater than a personal relationship. It is the task of the educator to introduce this kind of thinking – most often by example – to emerging adults. Learning this practice can make the difference when a young person moves to a new town and does not yet have a social network or a mentor to situate them. Feeling communally obligated will serve as a catalyst to get involved.

### **4. A Deep Encounter with Jewish Otherness**

The culture of historical-familism I seek to cultivate among emerging adults reaches beyond the immediate, geographic community to include Jews around the world. Extended, personal, and deep encounters between different kinds of Jews goes a long way to cultivating this sense of Jewish solidarity. One such example is the *mifgash* or encounter between Israeli soldiers and Birthright participants. In a large study of *mifgashim*, Leonard Saxe and his colleagues concluded: "The *mifgash* challenges the cultural identities of all its participants and enhances their sense of collective belonging to the global Jewish people."<sup>27</sup> David Mittelberg documents similar findings in his studies of school-twinning programs between Israeli and American institutions.<sup>28</sup> The same way that friends and mentors can foster identification with a local Jewish

---

<sup>25</sup>

<sup>26</sup> There are a few isolated exceptions. Beth Cousens, for instance, describes the power of mentoring figures in her study emerging adults in Boston's Riverway project. See Beth Cousens. *Shifting Social Networks: Studying the Jewish Growth of Adults in their Twenties and Thirties*. Brandeis University. 2008. . I am, however, unaware, of any significant study of the impact of Jewish mentors on emerging adults.

<sup>27</sup> Leonard Saxe, David Mittelberg, Shahar Hecht, Theodore Sasson. "Encountering the Other, Finding Oneself: The Taglit-Birthright Israel Mifgash." Maurice & Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), Oranim Academic College of Education, 2008, p. 2

<sup>28</sup> David Mittelberg "Jewish Peoplehood Education," in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, 515-539: Springer, 2011.

community, Jewish peoplehood, I would argue, requires these types of encounters to expand a young person's moral imagination. We need not restrict ourselves to *mifgashim* between Israelis and Americans. I have witnessed similar results when Jews from different continents encounter one another deeply. Finally, we might note that such encounters with otherness can transpire between different denominations, for instance, when Orthodox Jews meet reform Jews on campus.

### **5. A Commitment to the Study of Torah**

The study of Torah is a *sine qua non* of Jewish life. *Talmud Torah* needs no justification as an intrinsic good for anyone laying claim as an heir to the rabbinic tradition. Moreover, for a generation of Jews who overwhelmingly receive high levels of education, it should go without saying that Jewish textual illiteracy is inexcusable. The covenantal Judaism of mutual obligation among Jews and between Jews and God is described, interpreted, and reinterpreted in the broad category of literature I am terming "Torah." To be able to participate fully in the conversations of the covenant, one must be at home with this language.

But the present conversation concerns itself with the continuity and cultural vitality of the Jewish people. It could certainly be argued that increasing a generation's knowledge of sacred text and the library of commentary on those texts does much to enhance cultural vitality. This seems obvious enough. I would like to venture a utilitarian argument as well: The study of Torah can become a site of deep, substantive pluralism which builds intra-Jewish solidarity. We have witnessed the success of pluralistic, study-based gatherings such as *limmud*, or the large *tikkun leil shavuot* on New York's Upper West side. Studying with Jews from different backgrounds and ideological commitments is often easier than praying together. Torah study can become a rare, shared experience of ritual significance thereby becoming a site of deep encounter with Jewish otherness in the form of divergent textual interpretations. Many times I have witnessed the look of astonishment as a day-school educated student and a child of one Jewish parent report their different interpretations of a text: "You mean you *really* believe *that?!?*"

### **6. Living the Jewish Calendar**

The Jewish calendar is one of the richest ways to participate in Jewish ritual life. Among the great contributions of late sociologist of religion Robert Bellah was to call our attention to the role symbols play in shaping our reality.<sup>29</sup> Bellah has argued persuasively that the early modern social scientists were deeply skeptical of religious symbols. Some saw religious symbols as a primitive form of science, a stop on the long march of intellectual progress. An example would be those who see kashrut as a primitive form of sanitation, or ritual hand washing as crude hygiene. Others, like Freud, reduced religious symbols to veiled expressions of oedipal conflicts, and Durkheim decoded religious symbols as expressions of the idea of society. Bellah, in contrast, argued that religious symbols are irreducible. They are a sui generis human construction of the experience of reality. Moreover, the symbolic reality we create acts upon us, and informs the ways that we see the world. One who is raised, for example, in a world of Shabbat, or of obligation, or of permitted and forbidden actions, experiences the world differently than one who did not. Religious symbols are a unique language of a community, argues Bellah, and the speakers of that language, inhabit a different reality.

---

<sup>29</sup> Robert Neelly Bellah. "Christianity and Symbolic Realism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1970): 89-96.



It is not our task here to further discuss Bellah's powerful theory of "symbolic realism," but to point out that without a ritual experience of Judaism, part of our Jewish reality is lost. If Jews were to congregate, befriend one another, build mentoring and communal relationships, even study Torah, but never practice the rhythms of Jewish ritual, this would still be insufficient for two reasons: First, because of the power of religious symbols, this culture would be of a thin, academic interest. I see those secular textual study communities in Tel Aviv searching for ways to celebrate Shabbat and holidays together as admirable attempts to regain this important symbolic reality. Second, shared symbols and rituals reinforce the collective identity. In Bellah's persuasive argument, symbols create a group much as a group creates symbols.

I use the term "calendar" rather than "ritual" because I believe that the rhythms of the calendar are the most accessible and most educatively powerful way to introduce religious symbol to emerging adults. It seems to me far easier to introduce the practice of Shabbat dinner, *seders*, and *chagim* than to introduce other religious symbols such as *mezuzot*, *tzitzit*, and *tefilin*. Though all are symbols, those that involve what I term "the calendar" tend to be more collective affairs. They shape the time of the individual and align it with Jewish time. Finally, I might add, the calendar, like the study of Torah leaves room for pluralism. I have spent many a Friday night at tables with Orthodox Jews who strictly follow the *halakhot* of Shabbat, and those who go out to a bar after dinner, but that evening together over *kiddush*, *challah* and *divrei Torah* is nonetheless Shabbat and constitutes a shared, symbolic reality.

### **7. An Orientation to Service Rather than Consumption**

One of the defining themes of the present era is the penetration of the consumer market into all aspects of life. When anything and everything can be bought or consumed, goods that cannot be justified in terms of the utilitarian goods of the market are undermined. My own experience has showed me that young people in particular experience the all-encompassing reach of the market as, at times, oppressive. They seek other voices to temper the ill effects of consumerism. Jewish life, if it articulates an imperative to serve, rather than consume, can be a powerful corrective. For instance, I often invite students to Shabbat dinner at Hillel. On the campus where I work, students will "shop around" between Chabad houses, Hillels and other organizations to find the best meal and the most compelling social atmosphere. They are consumers looking to maximize their benefits in an open marketplace of free meals and parties. Any student who comes more than a few times, I invite to set the dinner up with me. Many agree and enjoy it. When they see the hours and hours of manual labor that go into hosting a weekly dinner for more than a hundred others, I am inevitably asked 'why do you do this?' Or, 'don't you feel taken advantage of, when we [the students] come, eat, and leave?' Many times now, I have taken these moments to learn with them the famous Talmudic adage that preparing for Shabbat is not beneath our dignity, for it *is* our dignity.<sup>30</sup> Honor is accrued by higher levels of service, not more rarified forms of consumption. The message is, admittedly, countercultural in the current atmosphere, but it gives community building a level of integrity that cannot be gained any other way. Many wish to teach, to speak, to be heard, few wish to roll up their sleeves and see their Judaism as pure service.

---

<sup>30</sup> TB Masechet Shabbat 119b.

These seven educational aims I believe provide the social and symbolic structure necessary to cultivate a generation of Jews who practice a form of covenantal, historical familism. If we were to take these seven aspirations seriously we might begin to imagine different policies than we have before. In this last section, I would like to recommend two such policies.

**Policy Recommendations:**

**1. Transform the Rabbinate: Every Rabbi a Community Organizer**

The rabbis graduating from seminaries today are being trained to serve a market that no longer exists. It has been said that being a rabbi used to come with Jews. That is no longer the case. The successful rabbi of today must find, inspire, recruit, and retain the people she wishes to serve. Rabbinic education, with its focus on the academic study of Judaism, sermonizing, and pastoral skills, does not produce individuals capable of realizing the educational aims described here.

Of course, it goes without saying that rabbis need to be scholars of Jewish text and have pastoral skills. I would argue that these skills are necessary but insufficient. What we lack is a rigorous training in community organizing and social entrepreneurship. The rabbis of tomorrow must be able to go into a new market, meet Jews, build offerings that serve those Jews, develop these small groups into a community, and continue to grow it. This is the skill set of a community organizer and entrepreneur. The first questions on an entrance interview to rabbinic school should be “What have you started or built? Does it still exist today? What are you going to build next?”

Rabbinic education could be transformed through a Wexner-like fellowship that funds not only one’s rabbinic education, but two years of seminars and on-site work in Hillels, Moishe houses, or wherever young people congregate. Such a fellowship would offer a graduating rabbi her first year’s salary to new entrepreneurs, tapering after three years. This would be the economic and educational basis for building a pluralistic Chabad-like set of rabbis to serve emerging adults. We should aim high for such an initiative. To make a dent in the Jewish population of North America, we would need at least 500 such rabbis serving emerging adults in the next few years.

**2. From 10 Days in Israel to 10 Weeks in Class**

On college campuses across North America, Orthodox *kiruv* organizations pay students a small stipend to take a 10-week course in Judaism. The course seeks to convey information, but also to build social connections between Jewish students, and with more religious Jews. Often these fellowships, as they are called, include Shabbat home hospitality in Orthodox communities or trips to Israel. From an economic standpoint, such programs are wonderfully lean. They do not require the maintenance of a Hillel building or a Chabad house. The educators need not live in residence with the students they serve, but can function more like adjunct faculty. Success is measured by the increased religious observance of each student. Conservative estimates place the total campus investment of such programs in the tens of millions.

These Meor, Maimonides, or Sinai Scholars courses, as they are called, offer a powerful model for reaching many young Jews deeply. Non-Orthodox movements have scoffed at paying Jews to study. More liberal groups roll their eyes at recruiting students to classes with clear ideological orientations. I see no problem with either of these trends. Birthright is itself a gift worth several thousand dollars. These ten-week seminars cost, on average, less than half. Moreover, ideological orientations need not be extremist or

intolerant. One could evangelize for a pluralistic, tolerant, respectful Judaism. It has simply not been done yet. I would recommend that the next phase of the Birthright trend realize this reality. Just as young people can now have 10 days free in Israel, they should also get 10 weeks of free education. NYU has already built and tested such a model, and has had over 1,000 students participate in the last 5 years with great success.

**Conclusion:**

Jewish education for emerging adults has been the site of enormous investment but little educational vision. I have tried to sketch here a vision of Judaism as an historical-family with a covenant, and have argued that such a Judaism can be cultivated among emerging adults by focusing on 7 educational aims. I believe that this vision is capable of providing for the physical continuity and cultural vitality of the Jewish people in America while allowing for a wide range of practices and beliefs. Finally, I have suggested two policies that might begin enacting such a vision. Over the last two decades, Jewish communal leaders have searched for a “silver bullet” -- a single initiative -- that might stem the tide of intermarriage. Perhaps it is time that we shift our focus from that line of thought and adopt instead “a golden theory,” or a set of principles, such as those that I have laid out here. These educational goals could be realized by any number of programs, any type of denomination, or Jewish practice. The question that remains to be answered is if we as a people have the will to mobilize our collective resources to realize such a vision.