

Rebuilding the Communities of Torah

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Prefatory note

The bulk of this paper is devoted to theory: elements of my vision of what the Jim Joseph Foundation could and should do, given the realities of American Jewish life at the start of the 21st century and the consequent challenges facing Jewish education as I have come to understand these realities and challenges. I will offer several suggestions and one major proposal by way of illustration for what it might mean to translate my vision into practice. Implications of cost will be briefly considered. My objective throughout is to take full advantage of this opportunity to think boldly and cogently about the possibilities and obstacles with which Jewish education today is confronted. My hope is that the Foundation will dare to envision the canvas of Jewish education in this country whole and anew. This paper provided conceptual rationale for that endeavor. I thank one and all for your attention and response.

The Modern Jewish Situation

1. Modern Jewish thought has from the very outset recognized that the modern situation demands a radically different sort of Jewish education than Jews had provided and received until the late 18th century. It is one thing to write a book of Jewish thought (or teach a class about some aspect of Judaism) to an audience who will remain Jews no matter what is written in that book or done in that classroom -- because those Jews are part of an integral community that claims them from birth to death and leaves them little choice in the matter of Judaism. The medieval cultures surrounding Jews - Christian or Muslim --also did their part in sustaining the taken-for-granted character of Jewishness for Jews, not only through anti-Semitism and other barriers of difference but through the support they lent key assumptions of Jewish faith. Modernity changed all that. It demanded that Jewish education be provided to Jews -- of whatever age -- who increasingly could and did choose whether or not to be Jewish as well as what sorts of Jews to be. This choice, moreover, could and would be made not just once in the course of adolescence or adulthood, but repeatedly. Education, in such a context, simply cannot be what it was before.

2. I knowingly simplify a complex story in order to make the point that America in this decade arguably represents the fullest realization in Jewish history of a trend inherent in the modern Jewish project as such. Voluntarism is the first governing rule of Jewish life in the United States today. Jews in this country, more than ever before and more than anywhere else in the world today, have the opportunity to make choices

concerning Jewishness and Judaism virtually free from constraints. The American Jewish self, as Steven Cohen and I described it in The Jew Within, is proudly and resolutely sovereign, rejecting the right of any authority to tell him/her what a Jew, a "good Jew," must do. Few American Jews have directly experienced anti-Semitism; just as few, I suspect, are aware of the degree to which their choices are shaped or even determined by assimilatory pressures and resultant Jewish anxiety about appearing or being different. The upshot is that every single observance, every affiliation, every belief, must plead its case repeatedly before the judgment seat of the sovereign self.

3. Education is crucial to this effort at persuasion, and inherently difficult: it must proceed without the most powerful teacher operating in any time and place: social reality. Zionism has provided that teacher to Israelis: Jewish time and space, life inside a Jewish language and a Jewish landscape, the "plausibility structures" offered by Jewish media, Jewish street signs, the simple fact that most people one encounters daily are Jews.

The Challenges We Face Now

4. Given that Jewish education in North America mostly addresses Jews for whom Judaism/Jewishness (1) is not taken for granted but a matter of choice, (2) is seen as a matter of individual identity rather than group belonging, and (3) does not occupy a substantial place in their hyphenated selfhood, Jewish education must proceed along two intersecting but divergent tracks, depending on whom it is trying to reach at a given moment.

A. It must, on the one hand, draw into the community and its age-old conversation with one another, with the world, one with God, the large number of individuals -- young and not-so-young -- who may see no reason for the conversation to take place let alone why they should be part of it. (Participation in this conversation is my preferred way, adopted from the Book of Deuteronomy, of characterizing what we usually call tradition.) We do so at our best not by preaching at them but by providing them with experiences of that community and that conversation: exciting trips to Israel, first-rate encounters with texts, moving religious/cultural experiences.

B. Jewish education must also, on the other hand, provide ever deeper layers of beauty, meaning, guidance, stimulation, satisfaction, growth, etc, to the minority of Jewish individuals already inside the conversation and committed, for the moment, to remaining there. It owes this second group renewed conviction that the way they have chosen to lead their lives is a good and right way, or even The Path on which Jews like them should be walking. It owes them the tools needed at every juncture to walk so confidently on this path that they are prepared to take it in uncharted new directions. It must provide a convincing rationale to mind and heart that life as a hyphenated American Jew holds out the possibility of a life as rich, deep, beautiful, Right, worthwhile as any that a person can choose or imagine -- if not more than that. We do so by confirming for them the pleasures of being an insider: learned debate about the meaning of Torah or the

significance of history, high-level seminars during Israel visits, contribution to Jewish policy-making or the Jewish arts, intense davening.

I believe that I/we have no right to abandon any Jew when it comes to providing first-rate Jewish education. What is more, the two constituencies for Jewish education that I have identified often overlap. My children, for example, have been raised as “insiders” but they are fully aware of the choice before them as to whether and how they will make their parents’ tradition their own. Conversely, an adult largely alienated from community and tradition may well undergo an experience, confront a moment, when the right combination of faces, voices, insights, love or work may open a Jewish portal wide. We must be ready with the set of further experiences, insights, ideas, and activities that will take that Jew back to the set of Jewish paths I am calling conversation and community.

5. In both cases, I think, the aim is not primarily to provide information and skills, as one would in the pre-modern situation or other cases in which Jewish identity is taken for granted, collectivist, and un-hyphenated. We are rather drawing Jews into community and/or sustaining their membership in that community. And we are providing reasons for that membership: Torah, conversation, path. Isa Aron and the ECE project have well-conceived these two goals as socialization and acculturation. The main aim of education for children or adults not currently part of the Jewish community, is to give them a powerful experience of community as well as of participation in the conversation that constitutes us as a people. I think the educational needs of insiders demand a similar combination of community and Torah. Experience is crucial to both aims for both groups. In no case are good teachers, curricula or classrooms enough, though they are always required. All that I suggest and propose flows from these points.

6. Community. Whatever Jewish meanings we provide are most persuasive when they come in an experience of Jewish community. That is true for several reasons. First, as I have said, ideas require a “plausibility structure” if they are to be appealing, let alone compelling. Community provides that structure, confers prima facie plausibility. Second, community is the best vehicle for our message because community is also the heart of that message. We are Jews. Our master-story tells us that our covenant with God began simultaneously with our covenant with one another. Our aim is not the achievement of individual enlightenment but the realization of a just and caring society with God in its midst. We are called upon to build and sustain such communities. Third, the reasons for that imperative are best grasped by experiencing them with others. The activities which most satisfy us, those in which we feel most fully human, are usually shared. As one of my JTS colleagues put it in a proposal submitted to JJF years ago, “today's students learn best through engagement with others and by actively processing information that they find personally meaningful.” Note the stress upon experience, in community.

All Jewish education today happens most successfully in communal settings: Jewish social reality. Camps are the most obvious example; a self-contained time and

space where pleasure and learning mix, the self feels expansive, and Jewish reality is all inclusive. Day schools work, in my view, not primarily because they devote more hours to Jewish Studies than afternoon schools do, but because to a child school is the world. If the dominant reality is public school, and Judaism stands off to the side in competition with soccer and homework, this structure to life proclaims which side of the American-Jewish hyphen is primary and which secondary. Israel trips (whether adult “missions” or Birthright) work because of the experience of community on the street (“all these people are Jews! the street is Jewish!”) combines with the community experience on the bus. Synagogues (and synagogue schools) that work offer the sense and fact of community to their members. My proposal below aims to bolster this effort.

7. Torah. But Jewishness, to be persuasive, must overflow with content. It is impossible to do Jewish education well without particular convictions about what it means to educate and what it means to be Jewish. In this paper I have intentionally followed Mordecai Kaplan in conceiving Judaism broadly as culture or civilization (“conversation”) rather than as faith or religion, even though the path which I am personally committed to walk in my own life, and that of the institution I will be heading, is widely known as “religious.” I assume JJF will be similarly inclusive in defining Judaism – and I believe as a life-long professor of religious studies that the dichotomy separating “religious” from “secular” is usually overblown and especially inappropriate in the case of the Jews, whose existence now as ever testifies to transcendent purpose and mysterious reality. We should not separate “secular” from “Jewish” studies in our schools, or “religious” from “secular” schools in our systems.

But the reasons we offer for life inside this community and tradition, and the way we understand that life, necessarily divide us into differing but overlapping sorts of Jews. Jewish education cannot entirely be generically Jewish. If I am to speak passionately as a Jew, I cannot speak for all (though I can speak TO all) . Our aim should not be unity but cooperation and dialogue: a network of distinct, overlapping and mutually respectful sub-communities and sub-narratives, working together to the maximum possible degree. Many of the challenges faced by any one group of American Jews are shared by all American Jews. But some educational objectives and methods will differ depending on which sub-community of Torah is advancing them.

A Specific Proposal

8. The proposal which follows draws upon several "do's and don't's" that stem directly from the analysis just offered . In every case, I envision well-designed empirical testing to determine if my (or other) assumptions are correct. We need new theories, curricula, teacher-training and incentives for students and teachers alike – all of which require testing and evaluation. We also need follow-up to ensure that our schools learn from these empirical trials, share and build upon the resultant body of knowledge, and do not start from the beginning over and over again as is now so often the case.

a. While one should not make Hebrew the goal of “Hebrew school,” some Hebrew is instrumental to socialization and acculturation. We therefore need to take advantage of the large body of knowledge concerning language instruction and its

relation to study of culture as a whole. Similar knowledge exists with regard to teaching other subjects such as history.

b. One should not hire Israeli teachers simply because they command Hebrew language skills, of any other teacher who does not share the commitment of the school or classroom. Teachers cannot initiate students into a community or conversation, let alone deepen loyalty to these, if they are alienated or ignorant. Commitment and professionalism are both required. My theory argues for trained and empowered community members as well as professionals who profess, i.e. stand fully behind the values, norms and beliefs they are teaching. The advantages and disadvantages of each sort of teacher in different sorts of classroom should be tested.

c. Jewish classrooms should address the learner (child or adult) as Jewish human being rather than as Jew alone. Our natural tendency, as a minority with limited classroom time, is to address ourselves only to the Jew, leaving it to the individual to fashion a hyphenated self successfully. Many Jews are failing to do this in a way that sustains the Jewish side of the hyphen. Large numbers are uncomfortable with Jewish distinctiveness. They do not take advantage of the chance for real pluralism that America offers -- perhaps because we never instruct them in ways of doing so. Kaplan proposed long ago that we teach "civics" in Jewish schools. I agree. I think we also need to acquaint our students with other religions and cultures. Pluralism too must be experienced, practiced, desired.

d. We also need to teach students what it means to stand as Americans in special relation to Israel. The growing gap between American and Israeli Jews is widely recognized as a problem for the Jewish people. Few Jews know why Zionism came about, or understand the complex realities of Israel, let alone who Israel is wrapped up in their community and its form of Jewish conversation. This ignorance not only has political consequences. It also affects the choices American Jews make for and against Jewishness. I feel an urgent need to address the matter.

e. Buber, Heschel and other Jewish thinkers were correct, I am afraid, in arguing that Jewish educational settings – because of the community and conversation into which we want to initiate learners or to which we want to sustain their commitment – must live up to the norms they teach if they are to succeed. Anecdotes abound of Jews turned off to Hebrew school not only by boredom but by the absence of warmth, kindness, relationship, sincerity. A voluntarist community of sovereign selves does not have the luxury of boredom or alienation. Hypocrisy cripples us. We have no captive audience. Nor do we purvey life-skills seen as necessary for individual success. So we must teach and demonstrate community; we must teach and hold to Torah. This is of course a tall order. We have no choice but to meet it.

9. In Conclusion: A modest proposal for spending \$20 million.

Aim: to better serve the majority of families who will NOT choose day school education by redesigning the synagogue afternoon-school for grades K-12 from the ground up. I focus davka on this constituency in order to illustrate how the educational

advantages of camps, day schools and Israel – all palpable communities – can be brought to bear in other settings.

Budget: Curricular reform for the "lab schools" proposed here would alone require upwards of \$2 million. Teacher-training would demand an equal amount, given the new combination of methods and formats I shall advocate. New modes of compensation should be tried. Facilities too may need rental and remodeling. What is more, there is in my view no point in JJF funding any such request unless it includes rigorous monitoring, evaluation, and built-in-means of replication. I have not attempted to provide a detailed multi-million dollar budget here. The major costs are readily apparent.

Four significant innovations will be tested

A. Given the success of informal educational settings, for reasons I have set forth, we should pilot experiments based on varying combinations of formal and informal education. It would be good to know, for example, whether Hebrew (or other skills, practices and commitments) can be better taught in camp or retreats than in classrooms alone -- X hours in one setting yielding results comparable to Y hours in the other. The same holds for socialization and acculturation in general. Suppose "Hebrew school," suitably re-named, was part of a package that included monthly or bi-monthly weekends in a camp or camp-like setting, varied according to age, target group, etc, ideally linked to summer camping and to group trips.

B. Suppose the entire experience were re-designed so as to provide maximum engagement in Jewish community and participation in Jewish conversation. That might mean, in the first instance, that teachers should be hired/engaged only if they take part in the relevant sub-community and sub-conversation (or are at the very least knowledgeable about and supportive of them), while fully involved in the larger American Jewish community and its conversation). Could we envision a corps of instructors composed in varying mixtures, for purposes of testing, of full-time professionals and of trained lay members of the community? The various denominations (and JCC's) also need to study, discuss, and experiment with varying degrees of cooperation with one another vs. distinctive pedagogic content and method.

C. Suppose furthermore that informal and formal settings were both designed so as to provide role models for varying sorts of American Jewish selfhood, making explicit that no one Jew can "excel" in every facet of Jewish being. Let us imagine a Jew who is passionate about social justice (and trained to convey this commitment as well as Jewish sources in age-appropriate ways) teaching that aspect of Jewish being; or a Jew for whom the arts are essential conveying that part of Jewish selfhood; or a Jew for whom Israel matters greatly conveying that. Such specialization grows in importance, I believe, the older the learner. Teens expertly ferret out and abhor hypocrisy. But no teacher who lacks an active prayer life should be permitted to teach prayer to learners at any age. Tefila is the paradigm case of a commitment too often taught merely as skill

and knowledge, with predictable results that have deprived generations of American Jews of any living notion of what tefila and faith and damaged Jewish commitment as a whole.

D. Because the aim is to produce Jewish human beings -- hyphenated American Jews who are active citizens of their society as well as committed members of the Jewish people who stand in relation to diaspora and Israel -- the proposal includes development, piloting and replication of ways of transmitting that set of convictions, as always in age-appropriate fashion. At the very least, learners need training in the complexities of standing alongside human beings of other ethnic and religious groups who are friends, close family members, or part of the student's own self. This fact of synagogue and family life must be explicitly addressed. We do not at present know how to do so. The need to convey knowledge of and commitment to the Jewish people and to Israel is widely recognized. My proposal would, beginning in middle-school years, include instruction in the varying moral dilemmas that go along with varying modes of being a contemporary Jew.

Can all this be accomplished in the after-school setting? I am betting that it can – if after-school transmits the convictions of a real community and includes regular “retreat” and “camp” experiences of community that themselves include more than text-learning alone: arts, social justice, ritual, travel. The experiment seems to me well worth testing.

The proposal is meant to show the relevance of the theory I have presented and illustrate the objectives that flow from that theory. Let me conclude with the hope that JJF, whatever it funds, will not tweak round the edges of existing educational models but seize hold of what works (and there is a great deal in Jewish education that does work), fund innovation, and take full advantage of testing curricula, teacher-training, settings, etc with the aim of insuring that what we have learned in every program is shared and applied elsewhere. The impact of doing so for ten years would be immediate and enormous. I look forward with excitement to the process that brings this about.