

A Vision in Practice: Nurturing a Community of Adult Jewish Learners by Linda Bloomberg

In pre-modern times, the congruity between family and society nurtured and preserved Jewish identity. The collapse of the barriers between the Jewish community and the outside world, and the resulting emancipation that has enabled the entry of the Jew into the mainstream of Western life, has severed the close-knit bonds of home, school, and community, creating the choices that threaten Jewish continuity. In these altered circumstances, large numbers of Jews have become bereft of Jewish knowledge, ignorant of Jewish traditions and customs, and alienated from Jewish life. With an environment no longer saturated with Jewish rhythms, beliefs, traditions and customs, we cannot rely on informal socialization to ensure the emergence of committed, resilient Jewish adults who will choose to pursue Judaism as a way of life. Being actively Jewish in our times requires an assertion of some sort, over and above simply being born Jewish; to be actively Jewish reflects an element of choice and commitment to participate in Jewish life. Gaining a share in the Jewish future has become an act of will, by deciding to take part in the life of the Jewish people, and by becoming absorbed within its history.

Hopes to create continuity, and to ensure the continued importance of Jewish identity rest with Jewish education.¹ However, while Jewish education, in the broadest sense, is the single most important mechanism for ensuring Jewish continuity, the potential of Jewish education as an effective solution to the continuity crisis cannot be assumed without an associated vision of its purposes and content as a directive guide to the future.² The panacea to the challenge confronting Jewish continuity in our open and pluralistic society must include the articulation of a compelling vision of what it means to be today's educated Jew. More important is the translation of this vision into a refocused Jewish education.³

My vision of the educated Jew

The essence of an educated person, and the appropriate curriculum to produce that person, has been the subject of an ageless ongoing debate. With an increasing consciousness of minorities; changing perceptions of the role of women; and the evolving social, cultural and economic demands of the postmodern age, many educational institutions are seeking to redefine, through their curricula, what it means to be truly educated. When we speak about an educated person in the Western tradition, we speak about judgment, character, responsibility, and sensibility -- notions that by their very nature are difficult to quantify. However, these terms convey a sense of what a human being is and is capable of in intellectual, spiritual and ethical dimensions, what a citizen is and what his or her duties and obligations are, and also what a civil society ideally can be. A definition of the educated Jew parallels, but, in certain ways, goes beyond this conception.

Learning, studying and becoming educated is connected to the ongoing process of Jewish identity development. Learning is lifelong in its scope, and since education is life itself, education never ends. As such, we must ensure that the conception of the educated Jew is prevented from becoming some premature ultimate; that is, a term that, once invoked, forestalls further debate, critical analysis, and scope for development. If learning is a life-long process, and if one is always in the process of becoming, questions regarding how and when one can be considered an educated Jew need to be addressed. The goal of Jewish learning should be conceived thus not so much as a product but as a process of fostering and nurturing continuous growth and

development. With knowledge being essentially the evolution of awareness, the educated Jew, as I see it, always remains a Talmid chacham; not a master, a chacham, but a student or channel of chochmah, of wisdom.

Since learning leads to and is informed by doing, the educated Jew has the insight and intuition to understand the complex layers of Jewish spirit and convictions, and has some genuine personal experience and involvement in Jewish practice. The term, the 'educated Jew' implies this, in addition to a resulting increased knowledge, an increased commitment to the application of that knowledge, and an increased involvement and effectiveness in Jewish life. Learning and study in Judaism, although of high intrinsic value, must be valued for the role they play as a prerequisite for the deepening of an enduring commitment, understood as the identification with Jewish tradition and Jewish peoplehood. As William Perry,⁴ renowned adult developmental theorist, puts it, "It is in the affirmation of Commitments that the themes of epistemology, intellectual development, ethics and identity merge" What merges for the developing Jewish learner, in the process of Jewish education, is an increasing sense of community, and an identity as a member of Klal Yisrael: a sense of having the choice of being a significant part of, and of being responsible towards, something larger than ourselves. Through the development of a sense of commitment, Jewish thought and knowledge can become an actuality, and Jewish behavior, the embodiment of that knowledge, a reality.

Judaism has always been represented by diverse philosophies, and, as such, in the interests of affording opportunities for choice and for ongoing cultural creativity, there can and should be no consensus on promoting a single paradigm of the "educated Jew." However, what we do share are our spiritual, ethical and moral ideals, as well as our unique and rich cultural heritage, and in working towards embracing mutual interests and achieving common aspirations vis-à-vis the Jewish continuity crisis, we may discover that our perspectives indeed originate from a unifying center, and that through our diversity we can contribute to a core vision. In acknowledging that education is inextricably tied to the process of Jewish identity development, the essential issues to consider are what educated Jews of different paideias--cultural visions of ideal educational curricula in the broadest sense--share, and based on shared educational objectives, what might be the nature of the ideal curriculum that will promote the development of the contemporary educated Jew.

Educational objectives

Emerging from my conceptualization of the educated Jew is the idea that a strong sense of Jewish self securely grounded within the Jewish tradition is the prime objective of Jewish Education. The educated Jew will strive for a meaningful Jewish existence, the fulcrum of which is spiritual, social and intellectual growth. The educated Jew will be competent in understanding the dynamic and evolving Jewish tradition in all its varied expressions, and will have the desire to conduct his or her life in keeping with the teachings of the Jewish tradition, even though the various components thereof, namely, G-d, Torah and Israel, may be differently understood and interpreted. The educated Jew will have the need to continue engaging in informed dialogue and debate, and will display openness of mind to sound argumentation. The educated Jew will be afforded the courage and the inspiration to reflect upon moral, ethical and spiritual choices, and to act upon these choices. The educated Jew will be anchored in Judaism, but that very anchorage will enable her or him without the loss of Jewish identity, to function in the secular world.

An ideal curricular agenda

A Jewish curriculum needs to reckon with the changed environment of the Jew in our post-modern world. While some reinterpretation may be required, we need to endeavor to maintain certain ideas and values that may be considered permanent and essential, these being our cultural possessions and spiritual ideals. The way I see it, an ideal program of study to appropriate the goal of becoming an educated Jew would include at least three components:

- a. Familiarity with the thought-life of the Jewish people as expressed in the Tanakh, and rabbinic texts, which involves the acceptance of Torah as a moral guide, and more importantly, being versed in its practical application through the performance of mitzvot.
- b. Since the fulcrum of Jewish national being lies in its historical consciousness, to be an educated Jew is to appreciate and strengthen one's bond with Jewish history. An appreciation of Jewish history provides us with a system of ethical values, both personal and social, both idealistic and practical. The educated Jew, willing to explore her or his Jewish heritage, with all its culture, tradition and laws, will be able to debate the ethical implications of being Jewish, of fulfilling mitzvot, and of furthering moral and spiritual development.
- c. Some knowledge of Hebrew language and literature. Speaking and understanding Hebrew means to "think Hebrew," and "thinking Hebrew" has the power to strengthen a common Jewish identity. Hebrew prepares the individual linguistically to study the Torah and the Siddur, and is an essential tool for the reading of much of Jewish cultural production. But it is more than a tool, in that without Hebrew, there is a lack of the visceral bond to the very essence of Judaism across time and space.

A curriculum, based upon the central themes of traditional as well as contemporary Jewish and secular thought, becomes the vehicle by which the individual will ultimately have knowledge of fundamental Jewish concepts, ideas, and values and should indeed be studied in terms of the ideas they offer and the obligations they impose. But just how the individual approaches, thinks about, and considers this knowledge in a meaningful way is what essentially defines an educated Jew. In addition to Jewish literacy as a sine qua non for bringing into fruition the educated Jew, my premise is that one cannot underestimate the value and significance of curiosity, questioning, and critical thinking skills, which, in my mind, are the essential characteristics of any educated person, and, for the Jew, an essential and fundamental precursor towards a commitment to Judaism. As adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow states, becoming critically reflective of one's own and others' assumptions is the key to transforming taken for granted frames of reference.⁵ Challenging and reformulating assumptions, and speculating on and exploring alternatives, has the potential to endow meaning to and validate experiences. This permits more integrative ways of knowing, and leads to more informed decision-making. The ability to think critically and reflectively allows us to examine our lives, thereby creating a sense of purpose and meaning. Critical reflectivity is a vital dimension in the process of moving cognition out of the domain of unquestioning acceptance and into the realm of conscious and active evaluation, analysis, assessment and choice. The examination of our choices, and the contemplation of the meaning of our reality, yields deeper understanding. And only by seeing more profoundly into the nature of things are we able to deal more wisely with them, morally assess them and shape them to our purposes.

As Abraham Joshua Heschel (1953) puts it, our efforts must be "to teach Judaism as a subject of ultimate personal significance."⁶ The curriculum of our Jewish schools must be designed to encourage, challenge, and support learners in their meaning-making development by communicating the positive and enduring spiritual

values embodied in our heritage, and making these part of the self through study and practice. The challenge facing Jews today is to achieve a balance among the many exigent commitments that confront us in our postmodern society, and to establish as a priority the upholding of Jewish values and the promotion of an authentic Jewish life. That Jews will appreciate and choose to base their identification on the values inherent in Jewish life and thought, and are willing to commit loyally to a responsibility toward fulfilling the moral obligations as active participants of the Jewish community, becomes the fundamental and ultimate goal of Jewish education. The function of Jewish education is to create opportunities for an ongoing dialectic--a trajectory for a series of challenges and responses that can creatively augment the course of committing to growing and becoming an educated Jew. It is a matter of immense responsibility that Jewish education undertakes the task of instilling the will to actively commit to Judaism; the will and commitment to be not just Jews, but Jewish, today, tomorrow and forever.

Translating my vision into practice

In my role as an adult Jewish educator, what concerns me is not just the assurance of Jewish survival and continuity, but the survival and continuity of a Judaism of openness, of skepticism, of argumentation, of inclusiveness, of justice, and of compassion. In bringing this goal to fruition, my responsibility as an educator is the nurturance of individuals, who, through a critical reading of their reality, increasingly become articulate and reflective constructors of knowledge, and who question assumptions rather than acting on the assimilated beliefs, values, and ideas of others. I am working toward developing individuals who are comfortable, confident, and willing to challenge the status quo, and who are able, from an informed position, to make socially responsible choices. My vision is that people will ultimately regard the world as changeable through their own individual actions, as well as through collective action in concert with those who share the commitment to social change; who on the basis of newfound ways of knowing, will endeavor to make a difference in their own lives as well as in the lives of others.

My story is one of many that illustrate the translation of an educational ideal into the reality of educational practice. In 2002, by undertaking to teach a group of Jewish and interfaith adults at a small reform synagogue north of Atlanta, I took my place in along line of Jewish educators intent on reversing the trend of a dissipating Jewish identity. What I have experienced, and what I continue to experience, is a vibrant, rich, and thriving learning community, in which we, as a group of adult learners, have grown and developed together through making meaning and sense of our complicated, complex, and often confusing lives. What my experience has taught me is that efforts to enhance the Jewish educational endeavor will not be accomplished in one stroke. Nor might our efforts as Jewish educators ever achieve epochal transformation. Yet by working to translate theory into practice, so that we can develop and sustain our vision, what we can hope and pray for is the opportunity to celebrate some small victories along the way. I have faith that this dream is a possibility.

Following are responses to the questions, "What was your motivation for joining adult education classes," and "What, if any, has been your most important learning to date?" These vignettes illustrate the profound impact of this learning community on some of its members.

Marc:

"One of the driving forces for entering the adult education program was to better understand what is the unique relationship that we are supposed to have with G-d, what are the values and meanings of the rituals, holidays and Torah and also to better prepare myself when someone asks me why I am a Jew"

and Torah, and also to better prepare myself when someone asks me why I am a Jew”.

“Our classes have enabled me to attempt to sort out or extract the complexities of Judaism, and allow me to put some reason into place. Adult education has helped me take small steps into understanding the multifaceted concepts and aspects of Judaism. It has provided motivation to understand why anyone would choose this path, and gives back confidence that it is a privilege to be Jewish, and assures me that what we do as Jews has a purpose in the master plan of life.”

Janice:

“It was important for me to connect with other Jews, and to find out more about the religion that I had lost contact with. It’s easy to go to services and get out of it just what you hear. In an adult education setting, the opportunity to share, ask questions, and respond, is so much more rewarding. In the group, I have felt comfortable when it comes to not knowing or understanding. For Doug, who is not Jewish, it was important to learn about the religion that we have decided to raise our son into. He says that being in the group has given him a clearer and better understanding of Judaism, and about the things that attract him to the religion.”

“We both still have a long way to go and a lot of learning to do, but since attending the classes I have come away with a much broader view of what the religion is about, and of course, how to be a better person and a better Jew. I have begun thinking more about what it means to be a Jew not just by birth but by choice; the choice meaning that I have the opportunity to learn more and be a better educated Jew. For many years I did not really know the reason why Jews did things the way they do. I now have a much clearer understanding of the way we practice holidays and the rituals. Adult education has also made me realize that the information is there if I just seek it out”.

Lisa:

“I came to adult education because I needed answers to specific questions. I did not have a burning desire to learn more about Judaism, but I kept on coming back to adult education because over time I found that it gave me a spiritual and religious outlet that I did not find elsewhere in my life. On top of this I appreciated the relationships and dynamics that developed within our group.”

“Adult education has sparked my thinking about Judaism, faith, religion, and my personal involvement with each. I have advanced in my understanding, and can now articulate my ideas much better. Our discussions have spurred me to do additional reading, speaking with others, and just thinking on my own.”

Working with this group of learners continues to teach me what a true love of Jewish learning and an enhanced Jewish identity looks and feels like. Together we are awakening within ourselves an appreciation of the soul of Judaism. Together we are experiencing the vitality of Jewish study, and are learning to see the world through Jewish eyes by exploring Torah, delving into Jewish history, and grasping the meaning of key Hebrew words and phrases. As we continue to discover that we are heir to a tradition rich in values, and as we strive to apply what we are learning, we are maintaining a living link between text and practice. Through critical thinking and dialogue we continue to wrestle with tough philosophical issues regarding how and in what ways we can pursue a meaningful and purposeful Jewish existence. We are all at different points in our lives, but through sharing our stories and experiences, we are on the road to becoming more educated, more committed, and more observant Jews. Together we are, as Heschel urges, “kindling a spark in the royal smithery of Jewish education.”⁷ Together we are articulating and nurturing a vision. It is a choice each of us, knowingly or unknowingly, has made.

Linda Dale Bloomberg is a counseling and industrial psychologist and adult educator. Her first Masters degree is in Psychology from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. She graduated in 2003 from the Siegal College distance learning program with a Masters Degree in Jewish education and is currently a Doctoral candidate in the AEGIS program, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. She is currently co-editing What we know about Jewish Education with Roberta Goodman and Paul Flexner. It will be published by Torah Aura.

Endnotes:

1. Alexander, H. A. "Jewish education and the search for authenticity: A study of Jewish identity" in D. Schers & D. Zisenwine (Eds.), *Making a difference: Jewish identity and education*. Tel Aviv, Israel: Studies in Jewish Culture, Identity and Community, School of Education, 1997, pp. 37-65.
Davidson, A. "Revisiting Jewish identity and Jewish education: Psychological perspectives" in D. Schers & D. Zisenwine (Eds.), *Making a difference: Jewish identity and education*. Tel Aviv, Israel: Studies in Jewish Culture, Identity and Community, School of Education, 1997, pp. 67-77.
Mayer, M. A. "Reflections on the educated Jew from the perspective of reform Judaism" in S. Fox, I. Scheffler, & D. Marom (Eds.), *Visions of Jewish education* (pp. 149-161). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 149 – 161.
Schers, D. & Zisenwine, D. "Introduction: Culture, community and identification" in D. Schers & D. Zisenwine (Eds.), *Making a difference: Jewish identity and education*. Tel Aviv, Israel: Studies in Jewish Culture, Identity and Community, School of Education, 1997, pp. 5 – 14.
Twersky, A. J. in *A Time to Act: The Report of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America*. Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1991.
Woocher, J. "Toward a 'unified field theory' of Jewish continuity" in I. Aron, S. Lee, S. & S. Rossel, S. (Eds.), *A congregation of learners*. New York: UAHC Press, 1995, pp. 14 – 55. .
2. Pekarsky, D. "The place of vision in Jewish educational reform" in *Journal of Jewish Education*, vol. 63, 1997, pp. 31-39.
3. Fox, S. "The art of translation" in S. Fox, I. Scheffler, & D. Marom (Eds.). *Visions of Jewish Education* (pp. 253-295). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 253 – 295.
4. Perry, W. G. "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning" in A. W. Chickering and Associates (Eds.), *The Modern American College: Responding to the new realities of diverse students and a changing society*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981, pp. 76 – 116.
5. Mezirow, J. *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991 and Mezirow, J. "Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory" in J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, pp. 3 – 33.
6. Heschel, A. J. The spirit of Jewish education. Unpublished paper based on an address delivered at the Pedagogic Conference of the Jewish Education Committee of N.Y.C, February 15, 1953.
7. Ibid.

References:

Bloomberg, L. D. *The educated Jew: Toward a holistic vision*. Unpublished manuscript submitted in partial

3/6/2009

JEN Winter 2005- Linda Bloomberg Ar...

fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Jewish Education. Laura & Alvin Siegal College of Judaic Studies, Cleveland, Ohio, 2003.