

Reflecting, Defining, and Creating A Culture of Change as Normative Excellence in Congregational and Communal Learning

by Nancy Bossov

We know that the world is spinning constantly and that the light, air, and all of nature is continuously in motion or in the midst of some generative process. Yet, we human beings have a tendency to expect little change; in fact, many of us abhor change and seek the security and calm of knowing what to expect, being prepared to address what's next, and feeling "ready."

The "unknown" is frightening on a primitive and unconscious level, therefore we seek the "known." As a purveyor of change, one must acknowledge this psychological phenomenon and strategize accordingly. Also, it seems that many hear the word "change" and take some offense. If change is necessary, it means what has been happening up until now is in need of change, in other words, "inferior." Those who take their work seriously and are invested with their heart, mind, and soul may be extremely resistant to change because it punctures the mission of their hard and earnest work.

Leaders, therefore, may want to use a more positive, optimistic, and natural term for change. Perhaps instead of "change" one may advocate for "growth," "development," or "evolution." These terms sanguinely look toward future processes, but neither criticize nor minimize the status quo or elicit anxiety about changing that which is known.

The semantics used throughout our work are crucial. One must take the extra step of analyzing and understanding the true meaning of certain terms and their conscious and unconscious messages. One example of this is the term "preschool." It is probably one of the most misused terms, second only to the term "nursery school." Educators must ask themselves, "Does this term and the precise meaning of the word reflect the mission, goals, and philosophies of the school that they entitle?" The term "preschool" actually translates to "before school" or "not yet school." This turns the wheel of repetitive behavior and perception of our early childhood schools as being something other than institutions of education. Hence, the average perception of the importance of this schooling and the professional skills necessary to carry out the functions of the school are minimized. Even when we refer to an "Early Childhood Program" or "Early Childhood Center," we are sending a message that it is, in fact, not a school. If educators truly want to educate and orient members of the community and decision makers, they must assertively refer to their work as "school" as in "education." Preschool is Real School!

John Dewey (1859 - 1952), arguably the most influential thinker on education in the twentieth century, knew long ago that the experiences a child is provided have much to do with the level of learning, growth, and the depth of understanding they achieve.

... I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life-experience of some individual. I have not argued for the acceptance of this principle nor attempted to justify it. Conservatives as well as radicals in education are profoundly discontented with the present educational situation taken as a whole. There is at least this much agreement among intelligent persons of both schools of educational thought. The educational system must move one way or another, either backward to the intellectual and moral standards of a pre-scientific age or forward to ever greater utilization of scientific method in the development of the possibilities of growing, expanding experience. I have but endeavored to point out some of the conditions which must be satisfactorily fulfilled if education takes the latter course."

John Dewey¹

We can apply Dewey's theories to our setting because there is nothing in them that is inconsistent with the teachings of Judaism. There are schools in North America that teach and provide meaningful experiences for every holiday in the Jewish calendar. There are

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even schools that are able to make connections between developmentally-appropriate processes like understanding the cycles of nature with the wonder and awe of God's creations. Where I have seen missed opportunities has been in the mindset of many educators and too many parents that children need to learn facts, dates, names, prayers, and stories without context of their world. I advocate that one's personal identification with our history's characters; conceptual connections about why we are here on earth, the meanings and function of prayer, and why we need to routinely worship God; and reminders to ourselves and each other about the *midot* are the foundation of experiential education that can have lifelong enrichment of a person.

We assert that the goal of all education should be the cultivation of better human beings. We recognize fully that the preservation of the Jewish group, the maintenance of the Jewish tradition and the fructification of Jewish culture are all legitimate and necessary objectives in any scheme of Jewish education. At the same time, however, we accept the basic assumption of democracy and, in truth, of Judaism itself, that the humanization of the individual should be the ultimate end of education.²

Rabbi Jack J. Cohen

Although Jewish early childhood education has been functioning for centuries, I believe that only now are we able to see the long-term potential of this time we have with our youngest students. Recent brain research confirms what many teachers have known instinctively for years: The first few years of life are the most crucial for the learning of language, concepts, relationships, social systems, and self understanding/identity. This is why it is vital for educators to take the time and concentration to understand, strategize, and plan longitudinally exactly how our congregationally based students should proceed from "Mommy and Me" through Confirmation or graduation to college and adulthood.

None of those involved in Jewish education regardless of setting, can do this on his or her own, but, together, they can collaborate and pool their knowledge base and resources to ensure a comprehensive educational program for our congregants and neighbors from *in utero* through adulthood, retirement, etc.

One might ask why a youth worker would be interested in or relevant to the planning for the educational track of a two-year-old. When a congregational education team plots out an educational course for a young child, considering everyone who is involved (teacher, educator, youth leader, etc.) enables the educational team leader to have a concrete understanding of that child's experience, knowledge base, and perception of Judaism. In theory, this would allow teachers in any setting to base their plans on educational experiences according to the appropriate stage of an individual. Experience and knowledge can have a flawless transition from year to year, and consistent messages throughout.

Although I doubt that John Dewey ever imagined applying his educational and philosophical theories to a synagogue community, once again he provides insight and optimism to a system of collaboration and planning. He provides a look at what education is and is not.

...the fundamental issue is not of new versus old edu-

cation nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*.

John Dewey³

"Experience and Education" 1938 Kappa Delta Pi

In any institution, it takes just one insightful, dedicated, and persistent person to lead the way. In fact, it may be even more of a transcendent experience for all involved if the notion of long-range planning and collaboration comes from one who functions in the leadership group as the "still small voice." I have had the personal opportunity of working with and being mentored by several voices of reason and understanding. One such mentor was Dr. Shulamith Elster, who taught me firstly about professional *menshlichkeit*. I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity of co-teaching and learning with her and now, so many years later, referring to her work as a confirmation and enhancement of my work.

One can expect that a leader will bring fresh ideas, insights, and experiences to bear, and that s/he will provide the institution with an explicit agenda. This agenda is likely to be adopted by the school community if it is rooted in the culture of the institution. Yet, it must also incorporate new elements and express strong commitments to specific values – especially those most commonly reflective of Jewish education – *lidrosh* – to interpret, *l'havdil* – to distinguish, *l'faraysh* – to clarify, and *l'hasbir* – to explain

Dr. Shulamith Reich Elster⁴

Just as Judaism teaches us to "Love your neighbor as yourself," we early childhood educators must respect our colleagues as ourselves. The problem is that if you don't love yourself, you won't treat your neighbor very well. If you don't respect yourself as a valuable professional who contributes to the community and society daily by raising the next generation, than no one else can perceive of you in this way and treat you reciprocally.

I urge my fellow early childhood educators to turn the page to the next chapter of our profession's story. Let the next chapter be the gateway to collaboration, reciprocity, mutual respect, long-range planning, modeling, sharing and pooling of resources, being proactive rather than reactive, and functioning as a full-fledged member of a caring professional community in our synagogues and schools.

Without understanding, there is no knowledge. Without knowledge, there is no understanding.

Pirke Avot 3:21

ENDNOTES:

1. Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938.
2. Cohen, Jack J. *Judaism and the Jewish School*. New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1966.
3. Dewey, John. op cit.
4. Elster, Shulamith Reich. "The Jewish Educational Leader: A Personal Perspective" in *The Jewish Educational Leaders Handbook*. Bob Tornberg, Ed. Denver, CO: ARE Publications, 1998.