

They Tried to Kill Us, We Won, Let's Eat - NOT!

by Art Vernon

The title of this article, drawn from a jocular summary of Jewish life currently passing around the Internet, holds no significant meaning for today's Jewish youth. Since no one is trying to kill them just because they are Jews, then victory and celebration as a response are divorced from a context that would make them meaningful. If no one is out to get you, what is the victory worth celebrating? And yet, many observers of the American Jewish education scene would conclude that this message still summarizes accurately the content of much of Jewish education today.

If this formulation of Jewish life, which did have some meaning for the baby boomer generation and earlier ones, has no resonance for Jewish youth today, why is it the foundation upon which so much of Jewish education is built? And if this formulation, indeed, no longer holds, then what is the apothegm upon which we can build a compelling framework for Jewish life in the next century? This is neither a simple nor a trivial question. It requires a conception of Jewish living that both embraces our past and projects our future. It requires a set of stories, observances and rituals that are compelling enough to be cherished and practiced by a large segment of the Jewish people. The answers can and should guide Jewish educators in organizing and developing educational programs of substance and meaning for Jewish families and Jewish youth.

NEEDED: A NEW FORMULATION OF JEWISH PURPOSE

Some readers may object that the aphorism of our title is still an accurate enough statement to define Jewish life and inform Jewish education. I am not arguing that adults no longer find this statement accurate and compelling. Rather, I am claiming that our students find no meaning in it. The life of our students is so radically different from anything we as adults have known that it is difficult to find common ground on which to stand as Jews. The fact is that a new formulation of Judaism and Jewish purpose is necessary if we are to retain the hearts and minds, let alone the interest and energy of today's youth. They are not buoyed by the stories of heroism of Israel's armed forces in 1948 and 1967; they are not greatly saddened by the devastation of the European Jewish community in the Holocaust; and they really do not mistrust their non-Jewish neighbors at all. The world of Jewish youth today is hardly differentiated from the world of youth in general. They all participate in the same instantaneous youth culture, comprised of music, movies, television and fashion, all supported by the real-time, world-wide electronic communications systems to which they have constant access.

In this environment, how do we prepare Jewish youth for a future we adults can hardly imagine or conceive? What are the issues that must be considered in beginning to frame a solution to our dilemma? Are there any guidelines from the Jewish past that may still serve as components of the Jewish future?

PROPHECY, PREDICTIONS AND OPTIONS

Jewish post-biblical tradition relegates prophecy to the provenance of fools and children. Therefore, discussions about the future are never predictions, but rather a series of plausible options. It seems

reasonably clear that advances in technology, science and medicine are going to continue to have profound influence, as they always have. For example, it is likely that people are going to live longer and live healthier, perhaps even to the proverbial 120 years. Knowledge will continue to grow at a more rapid pace, probably to the point that knowing facts will be far less important than it is today. Much greater emphasis will be placed on how to access and use information to solve problems. All of this will be supported by even more sophisticated information and communication technology that literally will place vast storehouses of information and entertainment at one's fingertips at any time of the day or night. The world will get smaller and smaller to the point that distance is hardly a barrier or obstacle to communications or relationships. The effect of these changes will be to offer individuals an ever-expanding range of choices in all areas of life. The challenge facing individuals will be how to decide what to choose. It will be increasingly difficult to sanction individuals for making "bad" choices, or to restrict the choices that are possible. The Jewish community may have already reached this point with regard to the issue of mate selection. While communal leadership is unhappy with the rate of intermarriage, no one is seriously proposing that individuals who intermarry should be ostracized from the community. Fewer and fewer choices made by individuals in any area of life will segregate them from others with whom they choose to associate. The word 'stigma' may pass into oblivion.

Another dimension of this culture will be even greater emphasis on personal fulfillment. Individuals will accept no greater duty than the responsibility to the self. Individualism will continue unabated, giving more authority and validation to the individual than to the structures of society. Loyalty to anything, for any reason other than the free choice of an autonomous self, will seem quaint, out-moded and old-fashioned. Imagine the potential consequences of this view on the institutions of community and voluntarism. My assumption is that this trend will be so taken for granted by people that alternative options will be either non-existent or nonsensical.

If the foregoing is even partially accurate, the possible consequences for Jewish life are ominous. Will Jewish communities and Jewish institutions be able to sustain themselves over time? Will the very essence of 'community' and 'institution' change so radically that they are totally different from anything we know today? If we acquiesce to the foregoing changes in society and in self-concept, accepting that a small community is powerless in the face of large-scale social forces, will there be a recognizable Jewish community of which to speak?

RESISTANCE AND ACCOMMODATION

There are two viable responses to these challenges: accommodation and resistance. Since resistance is unlikely to appeal to many of us, let us consider it first. Resistance to modernity is the path chosen by haredi Jewish communities today. At the moment, their opposition relegates them to minority status within the larger Jewish community and to the position of 'oddity' within the larger world. And yet, if accommodation leads to total assimilation as they claim, in the end, they may prove wise. While the underlying principle that Jewish culture is morally and qualitatively superior to other cultures may be repugnant to many of us, it serves to guarantee the loyalty of its adherents to 'traditional' values. The path of resistance implies continuing what one has always done, what one has inherited from one's ancestors, since in reality, nothing has changed. It means maintaining one's separateness and distinctiveness to the fullest extent possible.

The path of accommodation is the one most often chosen in the past by Jewish leaders. We have adopted those elements of foreign cultures that were most attractive but not inconsistent with our core values and made a uniquely Jewish synthesis. In our context, this means not only accepting individualism, but creating Jewish options which embrace it. Most boomers were raised with a strong sense of Jewish neighborhood/community and, therefore, being Jewish meant belonging to the Jewish people. Embracing individualism implies emphasizing personal faith and commitment and, thus, encouraging young Jews to develop personal Jewish life-styles and beliefs.

In line with this change, while the synagogue as we know it has been the predominant Jewish institution in America, in the next century, the havura or alternative minyan may become more adaptive to an individualized, personal culture. These groups will be less dependent on professional clergy and more dependent on the skills of their members. Therefore, Jewish education will need to emphasize acquiring the skills to lead a variety of Jewish rituals, not just the skills to participate.

In truth, resistance and accommodation represent opposite poles, with many gradations between the extremes. Neither pole is entirely desirable or really possible. Where the individual is situated is a question of degree, of closeness to one pole or the other. Nevertheless, it is often helpful to conceptualize problems in this manner for the sake of clarifying choices and their consequences. It would appear that teaching our students how to conceptualize and evaluate choices in this manner should be a worthwhile goal of Jewish education for the future.

CHANGES IN SCHOOLING

If we choose the path of accommodation with regard to these trends, the very core of Jewish education today, schooling, is subject to question. When it is possible to acquire mounds of information via electronic communications, when real-time large-scale communication over the Internet is nearly universal (via ICQ or other technology), why is it necessary that students attend a building and program called school? In an era when many more people telecommute to work, Jewish learning may best be provided in the same manner. Coming together at a central location, such as the synagogue or Jewish Community Center, would be primarily for collective celebration or sharing of events.

“Normal” education could take place electronically in the privacy of one’s home or one’s office. It may prove out that youngsters would spend more time in meaningful Jewish learning activities if the option to telecommute were available.

The content of Jewish education for the future, of necessity, should include more about values and problem-solving and less acquiring of facts and information. This does not mean resurrecting the values clarification methodology of the 70's, but rather selecting different content for the curriculum. Jewish values are to be found in stories, sayings and parables of our historic Jewish texts. We have, however, in recent decades, abandoned the text in favor of textbook. The problem with textbooks is that they represent and reflect what some anonymous author (anonymous to our students) thinks our texts are about. Older students today are particularly wary of accepting what someone else believes to be right and true. More than previous generations, they want to discover truth for themselves. Grounding in Jewish values based in Jewish texts is critical, lest personal faith and commitment become so idiosyncratic that it has nothing in common with other Jews, past or present.

A commitment to problem-solving in the curriculum of the future also implies a reorganization of material. Teaching Israel in the fifth grade is not the answer to the question of how Jews dealt with the issue of the definition of Judaism as a religion or Jewishness as a nationality. The question is far more complex and requires that many possible solutions be explored both logically and from the perspective of various Jewish text sources. At each stage of development in students' lives, different issues become relevant, as they struggle to make meaning of their lives. These life questions should be the organizing principle of units of learning.

A NEW APOTHEGM

This article began by rejecting a popular sound-bite formulation of Judaism, but sound-bites are a key element of effective communication today. It is difficult to assimilate and integrate all the information available to us, and so we demand that it be reduced to a simple statement, preferably of ten words or less. A century from now, what apothegm would be most appropriate for a vibrant Judaism? Ponder this: I came, I studied, we changed the world. This phrase implies choosing to participate, engaging in learning and the central Jewish value of tikkun olam (repairing the world). It implies collective action, thus, membership in some group or community. It recognizes the individual, but moves that individual toward a higher, collective purpose than simply passing through this world. It is neither hedonistic, nor solipsistic; it is optimistic and positivistic. It postulates a connection between means and ends, learning leading to action.

Perhaps, it is powerful enough to capture the hearts, minds, energy and interest of today's Jewish youth and impel them toward a bright Jewish future.

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