

Education After the Melting Pot: One Jewish View

By Tsvi Blanchard

Successful education in the twenty-first century - both American and Jewish --demands that the pragmatic and economic aspects of education be closely joined to the character building and cultural literacy aspects of schooling. North American public education has always had both a character/citizenship building aim and a "job training" purpose. While the American experiment in democracy has always involved developing the autonomy, critical thought and sense of responsibility necessary for the exercise of good citizenship, it has also been recognized that these same character traits are important "job skills" and encourage entrepreneurial activity. Public education in North America is simultaneously a social good, a commercial product and an investment in individual capital.

The Babylonian Talmud, however, clearly distinguished the character building from the pragmatic functions of education. Although having a trade was seen as beneficial to and, for most, necessary for leading a worthy life in society, learning that trade was not part of a Jewish school's curriculum. Jewish schools stressed studying Torah l'ishma, i.e., for its own sake, not for any practical benefit.

This Talmudic preference for the kinds of studies that build Jewish "civic" character over the kinds of studies that concern other matters manifests itself in a number of ways. For example, residents who shared a common courtyard could not prevent a teacher from using his premises for providing Jewish/Torah education, despite the disruption or noise caused by the students. The Talmudic discussion of the Mishna in Baba Batra 2:3 suggests that a communal public

policy interest is at work here. If the teacher in question were teaching anything other than Torah, the normal right of courtyard residents to control the level of noise and/or traffic in their common area would take precedence. Only when Torah education is at stake is the property interest of the residents overridden.

As a result, Jews did not learn the skills/trade necessary for public success in the same place they learned the practical and theoretical meaning of being Jewish. Torah/Jewish education prepared students to be part of Jewish society. General education prepared Jews to be part of a wider society inclusive of, and often ruled by, non-Jews. Since the wider culture was often perceived as hostile to basic Jewish values, acquiring the "social skills" necessary for social success was experienced as a necessary compromise with this undesirable non-Jewish society. Who would want to bring that compromise into the institutions of Torah education? As for learning "job skills," a combination of apprenticeship and highly focused skills acquisition was quite effective. Jewish teachers, however, were hardly the ones to provide this.

Unfortunately, while American public education delivered the skills required to find a place in the economy and also sought to instill the values of democratic civic life, the two did not influence each other. Except for John Dewey & Co., there has rarely been much interest in allowing democratic values to generate educational models for practical, work oriented training.

Nor was North American education entirely friendly to particular sub-cultures. The powerful, mostly Protestant establishment of the United States viewed its culture as a kind of neutral culture. American public education generally assumed that it was necessary and desirable to bring private individuals from diverse ethnic/cultural backgrounds into what was perceived

as the "melting pot" of the school. For most Americans, entry into the important public world, whether economic, social or political, was attained through public education and its WASP culture.

Since both economic and social success in America was more likely if one accepted this relatively monolithic WASP culture, Jews tended to downplay their cultural distinctiveness. We bought into the idea of public education as a means of becoming culturally and economically successful. Along the way we also learned to keep whatever remained of our ethnic or religious particularity out of the public square and relegated it to the private sphere instead. Regarding our Jewishness as a "private" affair, however, in effect erected a contrast between the spaces where we lived and acted as Jews and the spaces where we lived and acted Americans. For Jews who were intent upon making it in America, moreover, these two realms were hardly of equal value. For most Jews the most important lessons in "identity education" were taught not in the Jewish home but in the American public schools. Learning how to live as a Jew was at best secondary concern and was restricted to a small enough corner of one's life to allow for full participation in the general society.

America, its culture and its economy have changed. The hegemony of a WASP dominated melting pot is gone. Where cultural uniformity had long been considered ideal, the value of social diversity reigns. Unfortunately, public education has still not figured out how this shift should affect that part of its curricula which is not about preparing for a career. The arguments continue about such issues as: Which version(s) of American history do we teach? Which values do we support? How do we find a productive way for students to enhance their own traditions through interacting with those from other backgrounds?

Americans still expect their public school system to help their children to "become good adult Americans" and to "prepare them to earn a living." But how these twin aims of character building and career preparation ought to be pursued in the new post-melting pot America is hardly clear to most Americans.

Jewish education too has not really dealt with this "new America." Crucial questions remain unasked and unanswered. While nearly all Jews, including those who send their children to Jewish day schools, value American society for more than economic reasons, exactly how does being Jewish influence how we live our "American" lives? In both Jewish day schools and supplemental schools, "Jewish studies" and "general studies" are clearly separated. In practice, this means that most of what is taught as "Jewish," however essential we may think it is to our identities, somehow always ends up seeming relatively insignificant next to the subjects that are more directly relevant to the wider American society. At different times in my life, I have been both a university professor and a Jewish teacher. It wasn't hard to tell which of these got the most respect from other Jews.

In the twenty-first century, Jews will have to learn how to combine living as a Jew, living as an American, and "making it" in the world. In the past, the price of "making it" in America was too often an unequal merger of our Jewish and American identities and an uncritical surrender to the demands of American culture and its economic imperatives. With the rise of a pluralist American culture, however, this practical need to subjugate the Jewish aspects of one's being to the American has been called into question. Today Jews can preserve a critical distance from American culture and ask in the most profound sense: How can we earn a living Jewishly? How can we be Jewish doctors, lawyers, investors, social workers, etc.? And this is not all. In the new multicultural America that is emerging today, those with ties to a particular inherited

tradition are invited - indeed obligated - to ask themselves what wisdom their tradition can contribute to the creation of an improved America. Accordingly, as Jews, we must ask ourselves, how can our inherited tradition speak to American society, address its issues and improve its institutions? This is not only something we must ask in general. We must also ask it with reference to the very specific kinds of public policy challenges faced by our society today. With specific reference to the pedagogical challenges I've been considering in this article, we must ask ourselves whether the Jewish understanding of the integration of character and practical education has anything to contribute. And if we do feel that the tradition does have something of relevance to say, say it we must. In the public square we must say it. The quality of our common life in the twenty-first century -- both American and Jewish - may depend upon our asking and answering these questions publicly and aloud.