SOME SELECTED GOALS AND METHODS IN ADULT JEWISH EDUCATION*

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IN his book, *Master of Troyes,* Samuel Blumenfeld describes the pursuit of learning in Rashi's days as "not only a shield, but also a wholesome and creative channel for a living people bursting with accumulated intellectual and spiritual energies." This is an insightful distinction, and one that raises a vital question about adult Jewish education today. Is *our* pursuit of learning a channel as well as a shield?

The goals of adult Jewish education, as expressed by both our educators and our students, are nearly always couched in defensive terms—psychological reassurance, survival value, filling in the gaps of a faulty earlier education, the restoration of this, the preservation of that, and the prevention of something else. Seldom do we conceive of adult studies as opportunities to make contributions to others—opportunities for giving as well as getting, for making as well as taking. We talk at our students, we lecture to them, we try to transmit ideas to them. Seldom do we listen to them or get them to listen to one another. Seldom do we try to learn *with* them or *from* them, or to show them how to help others to learn. Seldom do we engage with them in being *original*—in developing and generating *new* ideas.

Jews today may not be exactly "bursting" with accumulated intellectual and spiritual energies, but they do have such energies, energies we fail to channel. *Creative* adult Jewish education implies action-groups leading to real-life changes, as well as listening and discussion groups. It implies production *by* students, as well as the use of other people's productions. It implies a seeking of new resources from within one's self, as well as existing resources outside one's self. But how few and far between are *creative* experiences in adult Jewish education today!

Education as a shield means defensive aims and transmissal methods. It means effort to reassure, to replace, to preserve or restore. In other words it means one-way communication. But education should also be a channel, which means creative aims and cooperative methods, that is to say, *multiple* communication. The test of this kind of education is quite simple. As a result of an educational experience, what exists that did *not* exist before? What new item exists, not merely in the form of changes *within* the students, but *objectively?* What new thing is there that *others* can see or hear,

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examine or use? What changes are the students encouraging in *others?*

A group is creative if, out of its studies there comes a publication, a program, an attempt at an art-form, a new contribution to research and scholarship, an offering to *other* student groups. A group is creative if it *adds to* the subject it studies, and does not merely add the subject to itself. Rashi and his students were truly creative. Their studies were preservative and restorative, they were protective and defensive, but they were also *productive*—productive of new insights, new formulations and applications, new records. They did not merely react to the contributions of others—they made their own contributions to which others could react.

Here is a new-old dimension in adult studies, a dimension in which we should experiment much more than we do. A group studying Siddur can compose a new prayer. A group studying literature can compile its own anthology. A group studying Hebrew can create, if only by translation, new Hebrew materials for other groups to use. A group studying a great Jew can produce an original play or filmstrip of his life. A group studying Bible or Midrash can write its own personal commentaries on the text. Any group can develop leaders from among its own membership—leaders who will initiate and guide *other* groups, and thus engage in the most productive kind of learning, the kind that comes from trying to teach others.

These are all examples of "study" groups. In contrast, action-groups are inherently creative, for their basic purpose is to make changes in their own institutions, or localities, or communities. Let us therefore have more action-groups in adult Jewish education. At least, let us try to lead more of our study-groups into some kind of culminating *action.* When we learn about the history of the Synagogue, or about Basic Judaism, or about Great Jewish Books, let us direct all this learning-about-something into *doing* something—effecting improvements, remolding our homes, establishing or aiding a Jewish library.

Our groups and classes in adult Jewish education, whatever their subject matter or their text material, can and should do more than enrich themselves. They should enrich the subject or the text, they should enrich the lives of their fellow Jews. Thus they make adult Jewish education the creative outlet it ought to be—channel as well as shield.

Another neglected goal in adult Jewish education lies in all-important service it can render to the individual Jew. The modern science of group dynamics teaches us that one of the chief values to the individual of a group is the opportunity the group creates for self-discovery and self-creation. Each of us is actually several different selves, all constantly changing, some known to us and others not, some understood by us and others not. In a group, a person gets opportunity to practice various of his selves, to try out the multiple facets of his personality, to engage in the process that group dynamics calls creative self-perception. We talk a great deal of self-expression—but self-expression can only follow self-understanding, and that comes only from experiencing, with insight, the constant shift and play of self as it relates to different groups, to different parts of a group, to different experiences within a group.

Adult Jewish education today shows little concern for this principle of group dynamics. We ask our students to learn about ideas, persons, places, things outside themselves. We present them with concepts, with personalities, with information, with books. We allow them, sometimes, to "discuss"—that is, to opinionate, to argue, to debate, to exchange views—but almost always about the non-self, and in terms of fixed opinions, in terms of positions which they held before entering the group and which they are eager to defend or impose. We seldom allow them, as Jews acting in concert with other Jews, to explore themselves, to interpret themselves, to find in themselves the sources of information, concepts, judgments, relationships. We seldom allow them to discover and develop *new* concepts, or to recognize and articulate those which they have unknowingly held and which, for one reason or another, they have masked from themselves.

Self-discovery, self-creation should be among the prime purposes of adult Jewish study. Naturally, most people do not care to talk directly about themselves. They do not know themselves well enough, and are hampered by confusion, embarrassment, or fear. Furthermore, direct discussion of self usually degenerates into abstraction and generalization—juggling with the lingo and cant of psychiatry and social work. The best method is the experiencing of literary materials narrating the behavior of other persons, of persons with whom each member of the group can identify himself or from whom he can dissociate himself. Such literary materials include novels, plays, short stories, narrative poems—the whole genre of fiction. When a group experiences a work of fiction together, when they read and discuss it properly, they are really experiencing themselves, exploring and discussing themselves. They are putting themselves into the story, reacting *personally* to its characters and situations. They are constantly concerned, knowingly or not, with the question of how *they* would act or react under the same conditions; and they are constantly concerned, likewise, with the question of how their fellow-students would act or react. Thus they are, in a very real sense, re-creating the work of art offered to them by an artist. If it is a *Jewish* work of art, they are engaged not only in a group experience and an artistic experience, but in a *Jewish* experience.

The reading group as an adult study device has not been widely tried in adult Jewish education—or in general adult education either, for that matter—but where it has been tried, students and leaders report glowingly of the outcomes. In a reading group, students read a story together—not separately at home—by taking turns at oral reading, or by acting out parts, or by listening to the instructor read it, as they prefer. Then they react to the story, in a fully permissive atmosphere. The leader does not prompt, or ask questions, or offer his own views except insofar as he is just another group member. He simply calls for reactions, and lets each student who so desires start a discussion-ball rolling, keep it rolling, or stop it and start another. His role is, at the right points, to focus attention on three matters: the kind of people the story's characters are; the kind of person the author is; and the students' own life-experiences that support or contradict the life-experiences in the story. His role is also, as for any discussion leader, to redirect wandering discussion to the specific story at hand, to sum up areas of agreement and disagreement, to provide opportunities to speak to all present, and to bring his own experience into the discussion whenever it represents genuine help to group thinking.

Imagine such a technique used, for instance, with a short story by Peretz or Shalom Aleichem, or with Biblical narrative like the stories of Joseph, Ruth, or Jonah, or with a novel like *The Siege* or *The Spark and the Exodus.* The material actually experienced by the group is concrete, dramatic, inherently interesting and self-motivating, and for the most part immediately intelligible to the average Jewish layman without laborsome notes, definitions, backgrounds, and

the like. Above all, the material is highly *personal.* It is about people whose thoughts, words, and actions arouse a strong echo in any Jew—what social science calls having a high balance for members of the group. Reaction and counter-reaction are sparked automatically. All students, those who speak up and those who do not, as they probe into the characters, the author, their own corroborating or conflicting experiences, react in effect to themselves, to one another. There comes a satisfaction, a release from tension, a feeling of self-growth. Personal fears and worries—*Jewish* fears and worries come into the open. Previous experiences, sometimes forgotten ones, sometimes troubling ones, sometimes both, are reviewed, reacted to by others of the group, illuminated, and reconstituted for the student involved. All this is simply unobtainable where people sit and listen to an instructor, or where they pontificate about problems and issues far removed from the immediate, the personal, and the concrete.

A reading group is different from the usual type of "literature" courses or lectures we are familiar with. These consist of formal presentations *about* an author or his works, or of readings from his works to which people merely listen, or of discussion of text material not personal or identifiable with self, or of the *instructor's* reactions to the material. A lecture on Shalom Aleichem has its place and its values; but it is not the same thing as participating in group-reading of a particular Shalom Aleichem story and reacting to it spontaneously, so as to discover for one's self both the writer's personality and one's own personality. A literary reading by a professional also has its place and its values; but, however brilliant and effective, it is not the same thing as searching out the exact wording in a story that led one student to interpret a scene one way while all the other students interpreted it some other way. Discussion of non-narrative material, in the same way, is not the same thing as reacting to story-people facing actual life-problems and reacting at the same time to real people in the room who are reacting to the story-people and to one's self.

The reading group is not just another course or type of course, but rather a *method,* a *technique,* by which we could explore almost any subject. We can study modern Jewish history by trying to assimilate generalities and conclusions delivered to us by an instructor or by a text and derived in their turn from still other instructors or texts. We can study modern Jewish history just as well, perhaps better, by *experiencing* it through the skillful stories and novels of expert writers of fiction. The belles-lettres of modern Israel will help us understand life and people there much better than dissertations and general accounts of its histories, problems, issues, and so on. Group reading of stories involving synagogue life teaches more about that life than any series of lectures on the synagogue's origin, functions, and development. Our literature, throughout all time and in all places and languages, is so large, so ample, so varied and complex, so adaptable to any interest group, that it is an unlimited storehouse for *any* aspect or topic of Jewish life.

A third essential but neglected goal of adult Jewish education is the determination and development of goals themselves. One of the purposes of an adult Jewish study group should be to *articulate* its purposes, and to *operate* upon them—to *deal with* its own purposes apart from the overt content or character of the topic of study.

This goal follows logically from three educational truisms to which we all pay fulsome lip-service, but which we do very little to realize in practice. We all agree that the goals of students, individually and collectively, are as important as the

goals of their leaders or their sponsoring institutions—perhaps even more important. We all agree, furthermore, that students themselves do not always clearly recognize or understand their own goals, and that these goals are not always praiseworthy as mature and positive. We all agree, finally, that students must be fully aware of their own goals, must evaluate them critically, and must expand or elevate them into newer, higher goals. Otherwise, students cannot have a truly educational experience, for they will be striving for goals set by other persons; they will be leaving uncovered the motivations that control their learning; they will be staying satisfied and complacent with their present goals and achievements. Essential in any course we conduct, therefore, is an open, frank, intelligently guided consideration of the group's goals by the group itself.

Regardless of its assigned subject matter, a group should at its first session draw up a statement of its purposes, and should decide on the best ways to achieve these purposes. In succeeding sessions, the group should frequently recall its purposes and decisions on method, and should question these purposes and decisions. At its final meeting, the group should plan a follow-up program based on its new goals and new decisions. A concrete example of how this procedure occurred is in a group studying American Jewish History in this Tercentenary Year.

The instructor began by posing the question of whether to study the subject chronologically, which is the usual procedure in texts and courses, or whether to study it topically by taking up first one and then another aspect of Jewish life. In the ensuing discussion, students articulated their motives and purposes in taking the course, clarified them, compromised their disagreements, and made their choice—in this case, for a topical approach. The instructor, who had offered his opinions only when asked for them and only as another member of the group, was of course prepared to carry on either way. He now indicated a number of possible topics, invited students to suggest others, and guided them to make definite choices, to arrange these choices in a definite order, and to apportion the number of coming sessions to be devoted to each topic. Students decided, also, *how* to do their studying—whether by home reading followed by class discussion, or the other way round; whether by reading and discussion in class without home preparation; whether by presentations from the instructor, and so on.

Throughout this session, focus of student attention was on their own goals and the best ways of reaching them. In the following sessions, students themselves decided whether a topic had been sufficiently explored, whether to continue this topical approach, whether to change any of their plans—always in terms of their original goals *and* any newly felt goals that had arisen. The final evaluation session was not merely one of stating gains and losses. In addition, and more significant, students evaluated their *goals.* What motivated these goals? Were they *now* satisfied with them? What new goals had arisen in the course, and were these on a higher level than the original goals? What studies should follow in order to achieve *present* goals, and by what methods?

This particular group had begun with a scorn for studying historical backgrounds, with a zeal for broad, inclusive coverage of a great deal of subject matter, and with a favorable attitude toward Tercentenary "celebration." By the end of the course, they were thinking along different lines. They wished they had gone in for more intensive study of fewer topics, and had explored more thoroughly the historical origins and trends. They felt Tercentenary empha-

sis to be somewhat exaggerated, and wanted now to study American Jewish life in broader terms, in relationship to all Jewish life, of the past and elsewhere in the world. Having enjoyed a previous experience as a reading group using Yiddish stories of the last century, they planned—and later carried out—a course as a reading group in American Jewish fiction, with selections grouped around timeless Jewish themes and issues rather than purely American ones.

This is an outstanding example of student participation and self-direction in course and method planning. It is also an outstanding example of exploiting adult Jewish education to help students find their own goals, fix them, modify them. By this process, they went much further than making and mastering a course of study. They learned to recognize and criticize their own thinking. What is more important even than achieving goals, they learned to enlarge their goals, to change them, to make them more difficult and more rewarding.