

Teaching "Judaism" in America: Religious Education in a Secularized Society

Jonathan S. Woocher

When I was invited by the Van Leer Institute to participate in this conference, I was intrigued by its title, "The Secular Jew and Jewish Studies — What and How to Teach." Here was a classical example of the non-parallel nature of Israeli and American Jewish cultures and circumstances. In the United States, where Jewish education is entirely voluntary, we have little opportunity to worry about what and how to teach self-identified "secular" Jews, because the vast majority of those who so identify themselves are non-participants in organized Jewish life, including Jewish education.

This does not mean that, in teaching Judaism, we have no problems that relate to the secularism of American Jews. Quite the contrary. The issue of how to implement Jewish education, the vast share of which is carried out within religious settings for a population that has been heavily secularized, is perhaps *the* most challenging underlying issue facing the Jewish educational community today. Within it lurk a host of philosophical, sociological, pedagogic, and androgogic problems that American Jewish education is far from having resolved successfully. Thus, from an American perspective, the title and theme of this conference are highly relevant. The key is to recognize that though the immediate contours of the problem differ significantly in my country from what you are struggling with here in Israel, the fundamental challenge — how to transmit Judaism, with its inherently religious content and worldview, meaningfully and effectively to Jews who may not (at least initially) share this worldview — is the same.

RELIGION AND SECULARISM AMONG JEWS

Let me begin with a bit of what we know about American Jews and their relationship to the categories "religious" and "secular." According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, about 80 percent of self-identified American Jews claim that their religion is Judaism. Correspondingly,

Dr. Woocher is Executive Vice-President of Jesna — the Jewish Education Service of North America. The article is a slightly abridged version of his address at the conference he refers to, held this past summer in Jerusalem.

about one in five of those who consider themselves Jewish, answer "none," "atheist," "agnostic," or something similar when asked to state their current religion. These are the Jews commonly referred to as "secular" Jews. The differences, both behavioral and attitudinal, between Jews-by-religion and secular Jews are (in the aggregate) striking. To cite only one example: 87 percent of Jews-by-religion say that their Jewish identity is "very" or "somewhat" important, as compared with only 39 percent of Jews with no religious identification. Similar gaps exist with respect to such diverse behaviors as attending synagogue, visiting Israel, and having all or mostly Jewish friends. Jewish education too follows this pattern: While more than three-quarters of those who identify as Jews-by-religion have received some Jewish education, less than half of the secular Jews have had any Jewish education. The gap in the next generation will be even greater.

Almost no Jewish policy-makers today advocate paying special attention to the Jewish education of avowedly secular Jews or their children. This is not a matter of principle, but of practicality. The overall level of Jewish engagement of many of these non-religious Jews is so low that it simply makes little sense to try to target them for intensive educational efforts. For those secular Jews who do want some Jewish education, there are a handful of existing schools, plus programs conducted in non-religious settings like Jewish Community Centers, that may provide viable alternatives to education under religious auspices. But, the reality is that educating effectively the 80 percent of Jews who acknowledge a Jewish religious identity is challenge enough today, so it is this group that merits and receives the bulk of attention.¹

What makes the challenge so great is the fact that a large proportion (perhaps two-thirds or more) of these "religious" Jews are not very religious at all, at least in traditional terms.² American Jews utilize various social categories — religion, ethnicity, culture, nationality — to define their Jewishness, both for themselves and in order to present themselves to others. Some of them associate Jewishness with several, even all, of these categories; others may feel that none is adequate to describe their sense of what it means to be a Jew. Furthermore, there is no clear understanding of what each of these terms actually means. (Are the hallmarks of Jews a "cultural" group, their

¹ Some might argue that if Jewish education were not so heavily "religious" in sponsorship and content, and more efforts were made to design educational programs for secular Jews, their rates of participation might increase. While this may be true, budgetary and other considerations argue for focusing most attention on the segment of the populace that does identify as Jewish by religion.

² A comparison between this large "middle" segment of American Jewry and the large number of Israelis identified in the Guttman Institute study as neither "religious" nor truly "secular" is interesting. Without going into detail, both the practices and (based on impressionistic evidence) attitudes of these two groups are not that different.

arts, literature, and scholarship, or their foods and family gatherings, or both?). Still, it is noteworthy that when asked in the NJPS, only 49 percent of Jews-by-religion responded affirmatively to the statement that being a Jew means being a member of a religious group! By comparison, 70 percent of the same respondents asserted that it means being a member of a cultural group and 57 percent, a member of an ethnic group.

Making sense of such responses is a speculative proposition, but there is no contesting the fact that American Jews (with the exception of a comparatively small segment with whom I will not deal here) are a highly secularized group. Henry Feingold has written about what he calls the "hard" secularism of American Jewry. This is not an "old-world" secularism that substitutes an explicitly non- or anti-religious ideology (e.g., socialism) for traditional faith. Rather, it is the embracing of a worldview and ethos that is liberal and individualistic, thereby creating a "powerful solvent which all religious and ethnic cultures [in America] must confront," and which inevitably "desacrilizes the former and denudes the latter" — without necessarily destroying them altogether. (It is for this reason that I prefer to speak of the "secularity" of American Jews, since this form of secularism can readily coexist with and even within a "religious" self-identification.) This type of secularity is not characterized primarily by a struggle to eliminate the realm of the transcendent, but rather by its benign domestication to humanly determined ends. God is not "dead," but lives as a "symbol," not a commanding presence.

What Feingold describes is the Jewish version of a development in American society and religion that has been widely noted in recent years: the erosion of the "givenness" of all traditional religious (and ethnic) communities and cultures, and its replacement by an ethos of almost unbounded individual choice. One of today's American Jewish clichés is that "we are all Jews by choice," and indeed, American Jews are unprecedentedly free to choose whether and how to be Jewish — and are fully aware of this. Tied to the voluntarization of Jewish identity is its partialization: Jewishness constitutes only part (and generally far from the major part) of an American Jew's identity. This is both a requisite for and consequence of secularization and the exaltation of individual choice.

This does *not* mean that secularized Jews have abandoned their Jewishness, or even their identification with Judaism as a religion. The nature of religious identification for many moderns has itself been transformed — optionalized — so that its characteristic mode of "commitment" is utilitarian and selective. Religion in this key serves as one of a number of storehouses holding material for life's enrichment. For the vast majority of American Jews, Judaism functions in this fashion. It is a menu of practices and ideas from which to pick and choose in order to pursue the master goal of modern

secular culture: self-fulfillment. What it offers may be highly valued at certain times and places (viz. the fierce loyalty of American Jews to Bar and Bat Mitzvah and the elementary-level education that precedes it). But it is certainly not life-shaping or norm-giving in the encompassing way of traditional religion.

This portrait of secularized Judaism as it is experienced and practiced by most American Jews today must be the starting point for a consideration of the mission, role, strategy and tactics of Jewish education in America, but it is not the whole story. In fact, if self-reliance in the pursuit of self-fulfillment is, as Robert Bellah and his colleagues contend, America's "first language," there is also a "second language" of tradition, memory, and community that persists as a counterweight. Many American Jews speak this second language too — some haltingly, some fluently. They recognize the limitations of modern culture as well as its strengths, most notably its weakness in responding to the human need for meaning, values, and community. They have not yet decided that Judaism is the way to fill this vacuum, but neither have they rejected it out of hand.

AMERICAN JEWRY'S SECOND LANGUAGE

If the contemporary situation provides Jewish education with an opportunity, Judaism itself gives it a mandate. As profoundly respectful as Judaism is of the individual human being and her/his infinite worth and dignity, and as happy as the symbiosis between Judaism and American liberalism and pluralism has been, it should be evident that Judaism and the predominant secular worldview and ethos of modernity can only coexist in dynamic tension with one another. Judaism as a value system and culture is clearly allied with those trying to propel America's "second language" of community, commitment, responsibility, and tradition into a position of greater prominence alongside its first. The challenge facing Jewish education is how to articulate this message of positive critique in a way that is at once powerful and credible to Jews who have benefited so much from what the secularization of America has wrought.

There are two possible courses for American Jewish education which, I believe, represent dead-ends. One is simply to ignore the inroads of secularization altogether and to operate as if Jews continued to live in traditional communities and cultures. This is not as far-fetched an option as it sounds. Indeed, a surprising amount of Jewish education is carried out without much reference to the lives that learners are actually leading. Many commentators have noted the gap between the idealized Jewish world of the classroom and that in which students and teachers live — one where Shabbat and holidays are *not* observed regularly, prayer is *not* undertaken

three times a day, Israel is a foreign country, and Jews watch MTV and CNN, rather than studying the sacred literature of our tradition. Jewish education that seeks to transmit a "pure" encapsulated Judaism can't work because the dissonance between life and learning is too great.

Neither, however, can Jewish education succeed if it is fully "secularized" so as to eliminate the tension between its contents and the prevailing ethos of modern society and culture. I have suggested above that this would be a strategic and a moral error — failing to grasp both the need and the opportunity for Judaism to offer itself as at least a partial "counter-culture" providing a vision for a meaningful human existence that includes, but transcends, self-fulfillment as its highest end. The revaluation of Judaism, as of all religious traditions, so that it can "speak to" the contemporary situation is needed, but if it is done in what Peter Berger terms a "reductionist" mode — seeking to translate all religious assertions into appropriate secular language (e.g., turning *mitzvot* into "ethics") — there is little reason to believe that Jews will see much need for preserving the original at all. There is no social base for maintaining a secular Jewish identity in America — what with little anti-Semitism, eroding ethnicity, hardly any non-religious nationalism (i.e., Zionism), an attractive general culture to identify with, and few public supports for distinctive Jewish behavior. Therefore, it would be futile in the long run for Jewish education to seek to secularize itself further, even if this would serve in the short run to close the gap that often exists between its contents and its clients.

Still, this gap exists, and it lies at the heart of the questions of what and how to teach. Though answering these questions in practice, at the level of curriculum and teaching methodologies, is (as we shall see) by no means simple, we can identify the critical elements of a viable and, hopefully, effective educational strategy which takes the secularity of most American Jews seriously, but does not yield to it. In fact, a reading of a representative sample of recent writing on American Jewish education and identity reveals quite a broad consensus in support of a strategy built around three key elements:

1. *Attentiveness to the learner and the fullness of her/his human situation, with all of its questions, assumptions, experiences (or lack thereof), interests, and needs.*

Those whom we seek to educate Jewishly do not come to us as blank slates; they come "situated" in personal, social, historical, and human contexts. Whether they are children or adults, they bring prior experiences with them, and they come with their own learning agendas and concerns. Some of these may be quite concrete, even mundane, relating to family and other relationships, work, a desire to enjoy themselves, or even simple curiosity.

Others may be profound and existential: What is the meaning of my life? What is the correct thing for me to do?

If Jewish education does not address the human situation — the experiences, concerns, and agendas — of prospective learners in developmentally appropriate ways, it is unlikely that these learners will remain within our sphere of influence any longer than they are compelled to (viz. the large drop-off in Jewish participation after Bar or Bat Mitzvah).

2. *A serious, non-tendentious presentation of Judaism, including its texts, history, personalities, practices, and beliefs, as a resource that can respond to, illuminate, and transform the current Jewish situation.*

In the corpus that we call "the Jewish tradition," educators have an enormous amount of material available with which to help learners respond to their interests, needs, and concerns. Some of this material, which comes not only in the form of classical texts, but also in the past and present lived experience of other Jews, should be immediately accessible and responsive. Some will require that the teacher and learner work hard to draw relevance and significance from it. Some of the material will reinforce options of response available elsewhere in the general culture, providing a measure of Jewish "added value"; some may challenge prevailing responses, present alternative options, or raise questions without providing definitive answers. The task of the educator is to build a bridge between the learner and the material of the tradition without over-simplifying or falsifying the latter by treating it merely as a collection of pre-selected "proof texts." This means that in addition to demonstrating how Judaism can serve as a resource for answering the learner's questions, the educator must help the learner to recognize and appreciate the tradition's questions and the templates it provides for constructing meaning in their own terms. This allows for the development of a genuine dialogue between the learner and what is being studied.

3. *The construction or utilization of social contexts — real face-to-face groups — in which Judaism's ability to guide and shape human lives is enacted, tested, explored, and extended.*

Life is not lived in solitude, and Judaism is not an intellectual abstraction. It is embodied in and intended to shape the practice of a community. An important part of what Judaism can offer in the contemporary world is the ability to give our lives connectedness across time and space. But this linkage, which is vital to Judaism's capacity to engender commitment — a sense that one is part of and responsible to and for something larger than oneself — must be made palpable in a real community of people. So too, the resources that Judaism offers to help shape and enrich our lives cannot be

fully appreciated unless we have the opportunity to see them in use and to try using them ourselves with the encouragement, support, and occasional critique of others. Without communities, Judaism is in danger of becoming merely literary — something to be admired and understood, but not applied.

The elements of this emerging paradigm for American Jewish education are hardly new. But if we look carefully at how Jewish education has often been carried out in America, we must conclude that they have been implemented inconsistently and often ineffectually. The third of these elements in particular — linking education to social realities that can serve as effective “plausibility structures”³ for what is taught — despite being part of nearly all successful programs developed over the years, has only recently begun to receive sustained attention as perhaps *the* key to enhancing the impact of American Jewish education today. In a secularized, pluralized society, in which Jews no longer live behind ideologically protective social walls and in which Judaism has a minimal role in shaping public reality, the existence of groups and settings in which Judaism does find tangible expression in a shared culture is vital to Jewish education’s plausibility. Judaism cannot make *a priori* claims on the loyalty and commitment of most American Jews; they must be persuaded to accept it as a preferred way of giving meaning and structure to their lives. This is the unavoidable legacy of secularization. But we can seek to make this decision more habitual, to the point where choice becomes commitment, where the beliefs, values, and practices of Judaism — the vocabulary and rhythms of Jewish life — take on a “naturalness” and a credibility that induces one to turn to them regularly and repeatedly when such meaning and structure is sought. For this to happen, the three elements I have spoken of must all come into play in the educational process: Education must start with the learner; it must present Judaism as a set of resources for living a good, fulfilling, worthwhile life; and it must be anchored in a community that values and makes use of these resources, even as it struggles to better understand and at times even to modify them.

A PARADIGM FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

This is a sound paradigm to guide our educational endeavors today. Implementing it, however, presents a host of practical problems that I do not underestimate. Learners are diverse; their needs, experiences, capacities, and receptivities vary. How do we address them all? Judaism is sprawling, multifarious, endlessly rich; it is in fact, as we well know, not an “ism”

3 “Plausibility structures” are social processes that provide a base in experience and behavior for the beliefs and values that a religious (or other) ideology affirms as being true.

at all. Jewish education in America is carried out by and large under the banner of one or another of our religious movements, each of which has its own (actually, more than one) understanding of what Judaism is, what it asks, what it teaches. And even within these understandings, selection must be made of the material to be taught, to whom, and when. By what principles do we make these selections? Do we seek to present the most immediately relevant, the most attractive, or the most challenging elements? Do we focus on ways in which Judaism is compatible with or critical of contemporary culture? Do we emphasize texts, history, or practice? And, if authentic Jewish communities are what we most need and most lack in order to anchor our teachings in life, where do we find them and how do we create them? Are the most powerful and encompassing communities not likely also to be the most narrow, the least able to carry on a real dialogue with modern culture? And, can we really expect a significant number of Jews to cede their autonomy to any collective, even one they have chosen to become part of?

Clearly, saying so will not make it so. Affirming a paradigm for contemporary American Jewish education is the easy part. Making it work in a myriad of settings, for different age groups, within different movements, or designing the curriculum, creating the materials, training the educators, securing public support — this will indeed be hard work! I am neither qualified nor prepared (nor are you probably eager for me to try) to elaborate on these issues. However, there are several general guidelines for our current educational efforts that we would do well to attend to. The first of these is that contemporary American Jewish education must have a strong experiential base, and for two reasons: First, many American Jews are “experientially deprived.” They have never had what we might consider even basic Jewish experiences — lighting Shabbat candles, singing the *berakhot*, building a *sukkah*, studying a Jewish text with a partner, performing acts of *gemilut hasadim* — or encountered them on a regular basis. As Isa Aron has argued, we must enculturate before we can instruct, and education must itself supply the experiences that will help Jews to understand and interpret.

The second reason for beginning with a rich menu of attractive Jewish experiences is motivational: why would one wish to learn or consider something that he or she have never encountered as enticing, enjoyable, inspiring, or uplifting? Why bother learning about the moral and theological dimensions of Shabbat if one has never participated in a Friday night of candle-lighting, *kiddush*, good food, fellowship around the table, and *zemirot*? Of course, Judaism is not just about such activities, but unless we provide them (and here, again, is where an accessible community, the natural setting for them, looms so important), we risk losing the game before we begin. The good news is that Jewish study is itself an experience that has demonstrated

the capacity to engage and excite many secularized Jews.

Authentic Jewish experiences are indispensable for effective Jewish education today, but so too is a concerted focus on helping Jews master (or at a minimum, achieve a basic competency in) the "language" that enables us to link them to a fabric of meaning. I use the word "language" here to mean both the way we talk about things (the words we use are important, but most key "Jewish" words happen to be in a language that most American Jews don't speak — Hebrew), and the ethos and worldview that underlie what we say. As Jews, we have a distinctive language that we use to tell the Jewish story and to define what is good and what is not good to do. When we use this language, we say things that simply can't be said in any other language. It is a truism that the most important terms in Judaism — Torah, *mitzvah*, *tzedakah*, Shabbat — can never be adequately translated. American Jewish education's difficult task is to help largely monolingual (literally and metaphorically) Jews learn these words in the only way they can: by encountering them in our texts and in actual Jewish life (again, it helps to have a community that "speaks Jewish"). We may then hope that at least some of these Jews will want and be able to become speakers and writers themselves, to use this language to tell the stories of their lives and to link these to the classical stories of our tradition.

I readily acknowledge that this prescription for a focus on experiences and language does not go nearly far enough to tell us in practical terms what and how to teach Judaism. But it may help to flesh out a bit my contention that to reach secularized Jews we must relate our teaching to their lives — including what they may lack — and offer Judaism as a powerful resource for rendering these lives more fulfilling and meaningful. For some, this approach may appear to concede far too much to the secular mindset, subordinating the question of truth to a pragmatic concern for what works, and giving up any claim to normativity for Jewish teaching. I do not think that this is necessarily the case. Rather, what I am willing to say is that, as my social work colleagues like to say, we can "trust the process." What begins *lo lishma*, may well become *lishma*. If we can engage secularized Jews in what Berger calls an "inductive" encounter with Judaism — its experiences, language, sources, and its life-in-community — in which each comes authentically to the encounter, neither giving up his/her claims at the outset nor refusing to take the other's seriously, we may find that Judaism fares far better than we might expect. And if, as some social critics suggest, modernity and secularism are already showing signs of exhaustion, then the real challenge may not be to uphold a religious consciousness in the face of a desacralized world, but to keep the center from collapsing, and to preserve a model of Jewish education as dialogue, rather than indoctrination.

In conclusion, a few words about how the theoretical construct I have presented relates to what is actually happening in American Jewish education today. There is a growing consensus about the directions that American Jewish education should take, and this finds expression in a roster of initiatives that hold considerable promise. The list includes: Jewish family education, high quality adult Jewish learning programs, new secondary-level day schools, transforming synagogues into "learning congregations," new summer camps by religious movements, novel programs built around such themes as ecology, human rights, and healing; and a communal philanthropically-backed campaign to send many more young people to Israel for educational experiences.

Over and above these individual initiatives, community-wide efforts are being mounted under the banner of "Jewish continuity" that are seeking to bring about fundamental educational and institutional transformation, to create more engaging and compelling contexts for promoting ongoing Jewish growth.

While these new or expanded programs are still largely unproven in terms of their long-term impact, their number and the fact that they all embody (to a greater or lesser extent) the key elements of the educational strategy outlined above, provide evidence, I believe, that significant change is underway — and in the right direction. There is a clear recognition that for Jewish education to succeed in America, it must reach people in new ways and new places, be both more intensive and more relevant, and, above all, help Jews to form communities in which Judaism can come alive as a language for both personal and collective meaning.

Will this endeavor to remake Jewish education succeed? It is highly doubtful that we will be able to provide a truly life-shaping Jewish education for more than a relative handful of American Jews — and many of these will come from the most committed, least secularized segments, those who by virtue of family upbringing or social location already speak Judaism as at least a "co-first language." Yet, there is great value in striving to implement the paradigm even partially, and even for those for whom Judaism will never be more than a "second language."

As we in America and you in Israel go about our work, can we learn from one another? I am sure that we can, though the act of translation across social and cultural boundaries is always difficult. At a minimum, we can and should recognize that we are engaged in a common struggle and a shared quest. Judaism is an ennobling way of life, and *all* Jews, even those who initially fail to perceive its relevance and significance for them, should have access to its riches. Jewish education must accept the challenge of providing this access, and, hopefully, we will meet it well. □