

Educating for Jewish Identity Doesn't Cut it Anymore

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by Paul Steinberg

Ask any Jewish educator about why Jewish education is important. Ask about the *raison d'être* of their educational institution and what goals they are trying to accomplish. Or even ask yourself: Why is Jewish education important – what's its purpose?

The most conventional answer given is that the goal of Jewish education is to help to foster and nourish a positive sense of Jewish identity. Positive Jewish identity is generally understood to be the determinant factor as to whether Jews will care about Jewish causes, values, and Jewish observance; it ensures Jewish continuity.

Here's the problem: Many American Jews don't really care about Jewish identity. After all, what does anyone need a Jewish identity for? What does having a Jewish identity even mean? Can't someone born Jewish live a perfectly lovely life without this Jewish identity or having to choose an identity at all? Isn't Jewish identity just a label that limits what the whole person is really all about? And, what's the benefit of a Jewish identity in America – it's awfully expensive and impractical.

A year ago, Dr. Jonathan Woocher delineated the conditions of Jewish identity in America in the twenty-first century.[1] He points to the fact that the commonly held conception of Jewish identification has collapsed. First of all, Jewish identity today is not ethnically monolithic in America, as there are Jews of many colors, languages, beliefs, and sexual orientations. What's more is that we all know it, so to act as if Jewish identification is one thing is just insulting. And second, Jewish identity, which binds us to a particular history and community, is an affront to the great "sovereign self"[2] that dictates the preeminent American values of individualism and autonomy. Jews, just like most Americans, want to pick and choose their personal identity and proclaiming a static Jewish identity violates their conception of democracy. Consequently, a Jew's Judaism in America is not denied, it's just positioned in the free marketplace to compete for priority amongst all of the other ideas, religions and cultures that each of us encounter – that's the American way!

Therefore, we need a new response as to why Jewish education is important. We need a new vision and to stop "probing our pupiks,"[3] and rationalizing the measure of our Jewishness amidst secular American culture. We need to address the *a priori* question: Why is Judaism itself important? Why does Judaism exist and what about Judaism defines its core purpose?

Mordecai Kaplan said that "the Jewish religion existed for the Jewish people and not the Jewish people for the Jewish religion." [4] That is to say, in order for Judaism to survive in the future, it must serve the purposes of the Jewish people, as opposed to the Jewish people serving it. For Kaplan, we can reconstruct Judaism to what we need it to do for us. However, he was wrong. He was wrong because we see that within our individualistic sociology today, reconstructing Judaism doesn't necessarily amount to how it will serve us, but rather how it will serve me.

It is this kind of individualistic reconstruction that leads to various differing and partial Jewish identities, such as cultural identities ("culturally Jewish"), half-Jewish identities, Israel identities, post-Holocaust identities, and activist identities. None of these, however, are helpful to Jewish education in determining its vision. Instead of reconstructing what we want or think we need Judaism to be for us today, we should focus on the core religious and spiritual values upon which the tradition is built. As Professor Shaul Magid cogently states: "Without religion as the center of Jewish identity, Jewishness in America is largely defined either *negatively* (Holocaust/anti-Semitism), *defensively* (pro-Israel), or *fearfully* (intermarriage)."[5]

So what is the Judaism we should be teaching and preaching? What can we point to that can serve as a foundational idea upon which we can develop a Jewish educational philosophy and curriculum in this American sociological climate? What can we tell parents and community members about the purpose of Jewish education that is greater than mere Jewish identity?

Here's a take:

“Judaism is a wise and good response to the question of what it means to be a human being in the world. For Judaism, despite anything we may see, or suffering we may experience, life is absolutely meaningful. Every moment is filled with infinite potential because each of us is constantly interconnected with the Source of All Life. So, everything we do in Judaism from learning, to praying, to celebrating, to Shabbat and Kashrut is a cue to remind us of the infinite potential of life – to stop and remind ourselves of our own self-worth and the worth of life itself. For we are all literally comprised of stardust and the sparks of divinity, and we each have the potential to heal, grow, and make a difference. We are to be continuously reminded of our unique role in the unifying energy of the universe, which must elevate us above the consumerism, greed, indifference, and smug self-righteousness that permeate our culture. The world is an awesome place and our job is to learn ourselves in relationship to it and to all that inhabit it.”

In other words, the underlying premise of Judaism is a spiritual one and filled with meaning, and that’s exactly what people need, no matter how or whether they choose to identify as a Jew. We must shift our educational attention and priority from the outward focus of Jewish identity to the inward focus of spiritual identity through Torah. A spiritual identity is an integrative one that imbues meaning to behavior and attitudes, as well as thoughts and feelings. It gives purpose to the past and inspires us to make both ourselves and the world better for the future.

This shift in focus demands a new breed of Jewish educator. A Jewish educator must now have not only a vision for a school, but a vision for Judaism itself. Programming, curriculum, and instruction are profoundly important, but are empty shells without spirit – without heart and soul. We need Jewish educators that know the “why of Judaism” just as well as the “how of Judaism.” If educators can’t speak to why we are teaching Judaism beyond the reason of Jewish identification, Judaism and Jewish practice will become progressively irrelevant.

American Jews are smart and they will come and they will commit when they believe that what they are getting is meaningful and relevant. The meaning is first found in the eternal spirituality of Judaism, which pervades all other Jewish expressions.

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[1] Woocher, J.S. (2012). Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 78 (3), 184- 188.

[2] See Cohen, S. and Eisen, A. (2000). *The Jew Within*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[3] As the great Jewish educator Shraga Arian put it. See Picker, Chaim (ed.) (1976). *He Kindled a Light: A Philosophy of Jewish Education*, NY: United Synagogue of America, pgs. 4-5.

[4] Kaplan, M. (1934/1967 rpt.). *Judaism as a Civilization*. New York, Schocken Books, p. xii.

[5] Shaul Magid, “Dogmas and Allegiances in Contemporary Judaism,” *Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* 40/669 (Sh’ma Institute: April 2010), pg, 4.