

Beyond the Melting Pot

Finding a Voice for Jewish Identity in Multicultural American Schools

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For the better part of a century, integration has characterized the Jewish experience in America, but modern Jewish education struggles to reverse that trend by separating Jewish youth from their non-Jewish peers and herding them into the walls of our communal institutions. This model ignores a particularly acute demographic reality: Most American Jews no longer affiliate with the communal institutions in which Jewish learning takes place. Consequently, this article posits that the key to providing high-quality Jewish education with the majority of Jewish students, who do not access Jewish learning or intensive Jewish experiences, is to reach them in the multicultural environments in which they live and learn daily. More specifically, I argue that we need to create, support, and replicate programs that are integrated elements of *school* communities, the places in which Jewish kids and young adults spend the majority of their time.

My critique of the isolationist approach to American Jewish education is not that Jewish learning in America lacks vigor. As Jonathan Sarna (2005) has amply demonstrated, the available options for Jewish learning and the rates of participation have never been stronger than they are today. Certainly, there has been an explosion in the growth of intensive Jewish experiences. In particular, Jewish camps and day schools have seen unprecedented growth, and the number of experiential options for Jewish learning—from service trips to adult education courses—has skyrocketed since the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, we are simultaneously confronted by the fact that a majority of American Jews do not belong to synagogues, do not receive a day school education, and do not attend Jewish camps.

Since the early 1990s the debate about Jewish continuity has framed the allocation of educational resources as a struggle between opposing philosophical viewpoints. On the one hand are those who advocate for the strengthening of “the core,” the pressing of our communal resources into service for the most organizationally affiliated. This approach focuses on Jewish experiences facilitated by mainstream Jewish institutions such as day schools, camps, youth groups, and synagogues. On the other hand are those who advocate outreach to the unaffiliated, through programs and organizations like Birthright and Jewish Community Centers. However, in both approaches, most programs continue to be run in Jewishly exclusive spaces; that is, within Jewish institutions for exclusively Jewish participants. With most Jews eschewing exclusively Jewish spaces, these approaches ignore the everyday lives of a majority of our community.

There is a certain irony to this state of affairs. One of the great innovations of Jewish history was the project of the Pharisees to extend the rules of ritual

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purity into everyday life and the scriptural laws beyond their originally intended purposes. Together with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, this process permanently decentralized Judaism, offering greater access to the sacred to more people and elevating the importance of local institutions such as synagogues. This innovation also elevated the importance of education, as it required all Jews to internalize an expanded array of daily obligations. Unable to adapt, the priests—remnants of a centralized tradition—faded into irrelevance.

Ironically, synagogues and other mainstream Jewish institutions risk becoming our new Temples. With the emancipation of European Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the growing integration of Jews into gentile societies, the prominence of synagogues and other Jewish institutions in the everyday lives of American Jews has declined. However, rather than extending Jewish wisdom and learning into the everyday lives of American Jews, we have kept Jewish learning locked in our institutions, accessible only to those who can both afford and choose to opt in.

To make Judaism relevant to American Jews today, we need to reinterpret the Pharisaic project to infuse our contemporary, integrated lives with Jewish wisdom and experiences. It is unsurprising that some of the most interesting spaces for Jewish education today extend beyond the walls of our contemporary Temples to work with both organizationally affiliated *and* unaffiliated Jews, their friends, and allies. The Jewish Outreach Institute, Hillel, The Curriculum Initiative, and Moishe House are all running Jewish programs in public spaces that are open to any participants. Although this approach raises questions about the separation between church and state, I believe that with care, this minefield can be carefully navigated so that Jewish education does not remain locked in the Temples of American Jewish life.

JEWIS IN SCHOOLS: PRESENCE WITHOUT SUBSTANCE

A majority of American Jews aged 5 to 21 spend most of their waking hours in school or college. In fact, since the 1960s, Jews—beginning with white Jewish men—have entered a broad range of schools and colleges in record numbers through geographic migration, upward mobility, and the relaxation of discriminatory quotas (Ritterband & Wechsler, 2004). To take college as an example, Hillel professionals informally estimate that 85% of college-age American Jews enroll in college, in contrast to 39.6% of the American population as a whole, 44.2% of all whites, 32.1% of African Americans, and 25.8% of Latinos (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The peer group of most Jewish students is religiously, racially, ethnically, and sometimes economically diverse. After graduation from college, few Jewish students will move to exclusively Jewish enclaves.

It is worthwhile to note that although Jews are well represented and largely successful in universities and schools, Jewish content is generally absent. Often, when Jewish content is integrated into curricula, Jews and Jewish culture are portrayed as obsolete. Jewish content most often appears in courses about Bible, representing ancient Jewish history, or about the Holocaust, representing Jewish victimization. For Jewish and non-Jewish students alike, the implicit message conveyed through these choices (in the absence of other content) is that Jewish

culture lacks contemporary relevance. When prominent Jews, such as Karl Marx, Franz Kafka, and Bella Abzug, are studied, the fact of their *Jewishness* and its impact on their work remain unexplored. On occasion, Jews emerge in elective courses about the Middle East, but are often portrayed as a monolithic and imperialist group. The diversity of Jewish opinions about the Middle East and the complex modern history of Jewish identities and communities that have affected this topic remain unexamined.

Jewish topics are usually absent in co-curricular programs such as university and school assemblies, holiday celebrations, and diversity awareness programs. When Jewish content is integrated, it is often framed according to its relationship to the dominant culture. Hanukkah, for example, is a minor festival in Jewish culture, but has risen to a level of prominence because of its proximity to Christmas.

Historically, the problem of representation in educational institutions and curricula is not unique to Jews. For traditionally marginalized and disempowered groups such as communities of color, women, gays and lesbians, and all combinations thereof, the problems described above have existed to a greater or lesser degree for centuries. However, for several decades now, other historically disempowered communities have increasingly seen themselves reflected in the curricular and extracurricular programming of public and private schools on the primary, secondary, and university levels; there is no good reason why Jewish students cannot see themselves reflected in these spaces as well. However, to advocate for the inclusion of Jewish content on campus we need to understand these institutions and the primary approach that has facilitated curricular diversification: multicultural education.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SCHOOLS

Multicultural education materialized in the 1960s in the wake of emerging liberation movements and the recognition that gaps in educational achievement among Americans are directly correlated to class, gender, and race. It challenged the practice of teaching exclusively through the lens of those who hold power in society, which at the top of the power pyramid in the United States has meant white, Christian, heterosexual men of European descent. As Banks and Banks (1995) write,

Multicultural education is a field of study and an emerging discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups. One of its important goals is to help all students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and communicate with peoples from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good (p. xi).

Although there are varied approaches to multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2007), multicultural education theory is rooted in the notions that educational content, pedagogy, practice, policy, and personnel should be representative of the cultural diversity of learners and that the self-esteem and achievement of learners are enhanced when we see ourselves represented.

Competent multicultural analysis incorporates several key concepts:

1. Culture is broadly understood to mean the array of identity categories that affect people including—but not limited to—age, class, color, ethnicity, gender identity, national/local origin or ancestry, physical or mental ability, place of birth, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.
2. Individuals' identities embody multiple intersections of the aforementioned categories.
3. The aforementioned categories should also serve as lenses through which to analyze and understand educational content and human experience.
4. Power and privilege are additional lenses through which to understand educational content and human experience and directly affect educational achievement.

Multicultural education has had a profound impact on the contemporary educational landscape, particularly following periods of intense student activism in the late 1960s and early 1990s. In concert with feminist theory, it has brought significant attention to the histories and literature of people of color and women through curricular enrichment and the founding of specialized, interdisciplinary departments at colleges; it has led to the diversification of faculty and student bodies; it has forced schools and colleges to reconsider discriminatory policies; and it has increased faculty professional development on cross-cultural teaching that can lead to improved achievement (Tatum, 2003). However, except for the recent growth of Jewish Studies courses and departments, Jewish content is still nearly absent from curricula, and Jewish culture is largely ignored by student services offices. Support systems in schools, and particularly diversity professionals, tend to focus on supporting students from the most disempowered communities, who are the most academically and socially vulnerable.

However, in isolated locales or historically Christian schools, the absence of Jewish teachers and the presence of insensitive school policies sometimes render life for Jewish students uncomfortable. Given the absence of Jewish content and the occasional discomfort of being Jewish in schools, the place where most American Jewish kids and teens spend a majority of their time, it is no wonder that Jewish connection is often lost to so many American Jews.

JEWISH RESPONSES TO MULTICULTURALISM

Ironically, it is the Jewish community's own resistance to multicultural education that has prevented our inclusion in educational curricula. Jews have long struggled with how to operate within a modern multicultural society, and the question of how to merge cultural identities has a long history in Jewish experience. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews lived as separate, corporate communities within both Christian and Muslim lands (Goldscheider & Zuckerman, 1984; Lewis, 2007). They paid taxes to the local sovereign and lived under often debilitating and humiliating legal restrictions, but were largely left to govern themselves. After the French Revolution, influenced by the Enlightenment value of universalism, Napoleon realized that the separate, second-class status of Jews undermined the new French concept of citizenship: the mutually beneficial relationship between individuals and the state. The separate status of the Jews also undermined the development of a singular French national identity. As Mitchell

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Cohen (1998, p. 43) writes, “European nationalists sought a basic cultural and political uniformity—the assimilation of populations into a monistic identity—over a territory.” Thus, in 1806, Napoleon gathered French Jewish leaders together and asked them whether they primarily identified as French or Jewish. In their deft reply, they described themselves as “French deputies professing the religion of Moses” (Assembly of Jewish Notables, 1806/1995, p. 128). When confronted with a choice between two, seemingly binary identities, they replied according to what they believed Napoleon wanted to hear, while subverting the binary for an amalgam of French national identity and Jewish religious practice. It was the first time in modern history that a Jewish community rejected the Jewish theological concept of *Zion*—the desire to return to the land of Israel—a desire that was viewed by the French as a form of Jewish nationalism and therefore a repudiation of the French nationalist ideal. It was also the first time that Jews defined their Jewishness in strictly religious terms. Throughout the nineteenth century, other Western and Central European states would follow France’s lead and offer Jews emancipation in return for loyalty to the state. Jewish communities always walked a fine line in this social contract, but ultimately, most chose the state over a separate Jewish, national identity.

In America, however, such a choice was never part of the social contract. No official body ever put the question of national loyalty to Jewish immigrants. It is no surprise, therefore, that the two warring philosophies of early-twentieth-century American identity—cultural pluralism and the melting pot—were first theorized by Jews. The term “cultural pluralism,” the spiritual predecessor to multiculturalism, was coined by political philosopher Horace Kallen (1915) to describe his vision for the integration of recent immigrants into American society. Kallen imagined a society in which cultural groups would retain their cultural identities while living side by side with other cultural groups in the American milieu. In fact, Kallen asserted that cultural pluralism is a precondition for the sustainability of American democracy. Little has been made, however, of the fact that Kallen was a second-generation Jewish immigrant and that his cultural pluralism theory was constructed as a direct challenge to the melting pot theory popularized in 1908 by another Jew, Anglo American playwright, Israel Zangwill (Marom, 2009). The melting pot theory asserts that immigrants naturally assimilate into a generalized “American” identity while shedding their indigenous cultural identities in the process. Regardless of where one falls on the spectrum between Kallen and Zangwill, it is fair to say that America presented Jews with an unprecedented but complicated opportunity to forge an amalgamated identity as Americans *and* Jews, rather than Americans *or* Jews.

Despite the contemporary continuity agenda’s rejection of the melting pot—the disappearance of Jews into an undifferentiated American monoculture—the Jewish community has historically evinced ambivalence toward *multiculturalism*. Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century were fierce proponents of public education; unlike Catholic immigrants who opted for parochial education in large numbers, Jews valued public schools as a route toward acculturation (Krasner, 2005). Jews have also been fierce defenders of the separation between church and state and have supported the exclusion of religion as a census category. Jews embraced the universalism of the Enlightenment, which was reinvented in the melting pot motif, as a ticket to achieve unprecedented success in

America. For many Jews, multiculturalism theoretically threatened the universalism that facilitated this achievement.

An unspoken element of this equation is that American Jews, most of whom are white, have been able to achieve success because of the unearned economic and political privileges that their whiteness confers in America. When speaking with contemporary American Jewish educators or communal leaders about multiculturalism as a theoretical lens for Jewish identity and education, I frequently hear a variation of the following question: “How do you balance the Jewish and the multicultural so that you don’t just become a purveyor of multicultural education?” Underlying this question are presumptions that multicultural is a code word for people of color, that all Jews are white, and that “real” Jewish education is done in isolation from non-Jews.

The terms “multicultural” and “people of color” are not synonymous. On the simplest level, “multicultural” describes the demographic reality of our society: Multiple cultures, which are legitimate and important expressions of communal identity, live side by side and often overlap and intersect. However, the inability of white Jews to see Jews of color as authentically Jewish and to recognize the intersection between Jewishness and race is a theme that emerges repeatedly in the stories of Jews of color in the United States. Linda Jum, a former member of Ayecha, the now defunct support organization for Jews of color and Jewish diversity, once remarked, “I know where all the restrooms are in every synagogue, because I’m always directed to them, with the comment, ‘The room you’re looking for is that way’” (Khazzoom, 2005). The implication is that her presence in the synagogue could only be as a visitor or custodian, rather than as a Jewish congregant. Similarly, Eliana Slurzberg, an African American Jewish participant in Ayecha’s “Rites of Passage” program, disclosed during her Bat Mitzvah sermon that during services one day she “overheard a little girl ask her mother what a Black person was doing in the synagogue” (Slurzberg, 2006, 5).

By expanding our understanding of Jewish diversity and the ways in which multicultural theory and practice can strengthen our own community, we will be able to apply similar principles to the integration of Jewish students and content into multicultural schools and universities.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR JEWISH LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

Multicultural theory and practice have dramatically changed the world of general education, opening spaces for the exploration of identity in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular settings. As such, it is a useful framework for integrating Jewish content into public and private schools and colleges, where most Jewish students spend the majority of their time. In many such institutions, multicultural education has been a common approach for more than 25 years, and diversity professionals in these schools are now ubiquitous. Thousands of educators and students from private schools attend the National Association of Independent Schools’ annual diversity conference; public school districts regularly send teachers to multicultural education workshops; colleges increasingly require courses in cultural and women’s studies, and specialized departments have proliferated; and teachers now use race, gender, and class as lenses through which to analyze a host of content. Multicultural education is now the primary

educational framework through which cultural studies are introduced into the classroom, even when teachers do not label the approach. As such, the Jewish community should consider how multicultural education can serve as a rationale and vehicle through which Jewish culture and history can be accessed by students in schools and colleges. The following concrete avenues come to mind:

Support Enrichment Organizations Working in Primary, Secondary, and Higher Education

A host of nonprofit organizations introduce Jewish content into the classroom and student clubs through partnerships with schools and universities. Examples include the Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education, Facing History and Ourselves, Hillel, the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, The Curriculum Initiative, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and the American Jewish Historical Society. Although the separation of church and state is an issue for public institutions, Jewish content need not be narrowly pigeonholed and dismissed as religious content. The academic teaching of Jewish content in history, literature, and even comparative religion courses is not synonymous with the *practice* of religion in schools. In a standard American history curriculum, for example, Jewish history can be related to the Spanish expulsion and early American exploration, Jews in New Amsterdam, immigration, labor movements, and the civil rights movement.

Enrichment organizations can also provide the necessary resources for school assemblies, chapels, and other all-school programs. Diversity directors, chaplains, and deans actively plan film screenings, guest lectures, and panel discussions at schools, which are perfect venues for celebrating Jewish culture or bringing Jewish lenses to bear on topics relevant to school communities. For example, Menlo School in California brought a host of speakers to campus for a day of learning on the diversity of Israeli society and culture, which helped students and teachers hold nuanced and productive dialogues about a charged and sensitive topic.

Enrichment organizations can also host special off-campus trips, such as a day-long program developed for Baltimore's Bryn Mawr School, which brought the entire 10th-grade class to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for a day of learning and discussion with museum scholars as part of a European history curriculum. Enrichment organizations can host important projects that are a part of schools' ongoing service-learning efforts. Organizations like Baltimore's Kayam Farm Environmental Education Center and New York's Dorot can help students use Jewish wisdom to wrestle with ethical issues and challenges that arise in the pursuit of social and environmental justice.

Enrichment organizations are invaluable for professional training of faculty who aim to teach Jewish content. One-on-one support to Jewish student advisors, diversity directors, and chaplains; consulting on curricular resources; and training in Jewish methodologies—these are all avenues through which teachers can learn to integrate content into courses and extracurricular activities such as clubs.

In short, closer connections between enrichment organizations and campus officials, such as chaplains, student services professionals, diversity professionals, and faculty, can influence a school or college to support Jewish students and more effectively integrate Jewish content.

Advocate for Jewish Culture Clubs in High Schools

Cultural clubs are ubiquitous in high schools and colleges. Jewish student clubs are a great way for Jewish students and their friends to learn together, socialize, plan school programs, and develop critical leadership skills. Providing well-trained and committed faculty advisors and funding to run innovative, student-centered programs will go a long way toward empowering students to take charge of their own Jewish journeys. Key to the success of clubs is the welcoming of non-Jewish friends and allies as members and participants. Experience shows that many Jewish students will only participate if their friends are welcomed. Adolescent development is a process of identity exploration, individuation, and independence from parents, much of which occurs through the medium of a tightly knit peer group; for most of today's Jewish students, that peer group is diverse.

As an example, high schools and colleges often use lunch as a time for facilitated discussions about interesting topics. At the Trinity School in New York, the Jewish and African American student clubs ran a series of lunch-time discussions on shared cultural signifiers. One such discussion explored Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, in which King referenced not only Abraham Lincoln but also the biblical Jewish prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Students explored the reasons and relevance behind King's decision to position himself in line with the Jewish prophetic tradition.

Support the Growth of Jewish Studies Departments at Colleges and Universities, and of Jewish Studies Electives in High Schools

Jewish learning should not be exclusive to Jews. African American Studies, Women's Studies, Queer Studies... these interdisciplinary departments have long drawn insiders *and* outsiders to courses, and such departments have never been accused of "watering down" content, a charge often leveled at Jewish educators who run open programs. Academically rigorous courses should challenge all students; it is essentialist to claim that Jews intuitively know the content and will be held back by non-Jewish peers, even if Jewish students feel a different emotional connection to the material.

In some cases, the creation of departments or electives is not an option. However, there are still ways to introduce Jewish content within the existing structure of courses, and schools are increasingly diversifying their curricula to introduce new content. For example, the National Cathedral School in Washington, DC, has increasingly turned to guest lecturers to bring new perspectives to a world religions curriculum. A Jewish educator was recently invited to teach about the evolution of Jewish religious and communal life through history. The goal was to help students understand how modern Jewish life evolved from the biblical Judaism students study in class.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When I look at the literature on multicultural education, it is hard to argue with the approach. Koppelman and Goodhart (2005) write, "Multicultural education is based on a commitment to pluralism; its guiding purpose is to prepare students to be active participants in a diverse democratic society." Gollnick (1980) describes five goals for multicultural education:

Key to the success of [Jewish cultural] clubs is the welcoming of non-Jewish friends and allies as members and participants.

1. Promoting the strength and value of cultural diversity
2. Promoting human rights and respect for those who are different from oneself
3. Promoting alternative life choices for people
4. Promoting social justice and equal opportunity for all people
5. Promoting equity in the distribution of power among groups

Few would argue with the educational importance of these points. Thus, when a school commits itself to multicultural ideals, it opens up multiple doors for Jewish life. It provides a rationale for integrating Jewish students and faculty into school life and Jewish studies into the curriculum. It also helps affirm the cultural diversity within the Jewish community. And it mandates that we help Jewish kids promote the values articulated above and to do so as Jews through a rootedness in Jewish values. Finally, it opens the door for us to work with non-Jews with whom Jewish students interact every day. The Jewish community has never been exclusive to Jews. Jewish history is replete with examples of people who have felt a part of, or have allied themselves with, the Jewish community. Many of our Jewish students have parents and other family members who are not Jewish. The Jewish community's tent is expansive.

The prevailing, isolationist model of Jewish education that pulls students out of their everyday lives and separates them from their peers has not inspired significant participation. Sometimes, separating and feeling grounded as a group are important, and we should honor those needs. However, if we are to inspire Jewish students to feel invested in their Jewishness, then Jewish learning has to imbue their everyday lives with meaning. The key to doing this is through high-quality Jewish education in the multicultural environments in which they live and learn daily. Our aim should be to create, support, and replicate programs that are integrated elements of students' schools, the communities in which they spend most of their time. Multicultural education is the practical framework for this approach.

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