

## Ennobling Ignorance: An Educator's Response

Jeffrey A. Spitzer

VANESSA OCHS HAS BEEN listening to how people justify their decision-making in vague Jewish terms, and her list of sensibilities may be a reasonable description of how they do that. Ochs writes, "Does this mean that Jews whose behaviors or outlook are not governed by total or even partial acceptance of halakhah lack distinctive ways of thinking about how to act in the world?" The failure to conceive of one's decision-making in Jewish terms, however, derives not from a choice to lead a life in which halakhah is not determinative; it derives from a generalized

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ignorance of the categories of traditional Jewish thought. Ochs's effort to define and categorize these sensibilities enshrines and ennobles ignorance.

I will not attempt to respond to Ochs's specific sensibilities; I will confine myself to a few general observations and then proceed to the larger problem her essay reveals. Many of her ten sensibilities are simply categories derived from Jewish sources, frequently used both in halakhic (legal) and aggadic (theological) contexts. These present no problems other than the obvious question of why these and why not those. Other sensibilities are expressed in traditional terms but are so general that they cannot be understood as a "Jewish" sensibility in any distinctive sense. And some are so amorphous as to be meaningless as categories that could help with decision-making.

Ochs is correct in her claim that "making distinctions matters to us." This is also true of the way in which Jews parse the moral world. Rather than reducing our sensibilities, Jews multiply the available categories, compare and contrast the relevant values, and extract meaning and guidance from how the different values interact. Statements of value are comparative; we learn most about our Jewish values by looking at them in conflict.

As an educator, I find the sensibilities puzzling. As educators, we strive to train our students in a common language of moral dis-

course so that individuals can resolve disputes and agree upon moral choices. We strive for precision and clarity. Are these ten sensibilities to be taught and mastered as the basis of an ethical system? What, then, would happen to honesty, fidelity, and the responsibility of Israel one to another, just to name a few values that did not make Ochs's "cut"?

Adherence to halakhah is not the issue; familiarity with the relevant categories and their sources in classical texts is. Consider how Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef decided in halakhic terms whether a doctor should violate patient confidentiality when the patient would cause public danger by concealing his epilepsy in order to receive a driver's license (Responsa Yehaveh Da'at 4:60). Yosef responded in terms of the prohibitions against tale-bearing (Leviticus 19:16) and against standing idly by while the blood of one's fellow was spilled (which concludes that same verse), and in so doing framed a medical ethics issue in accessible and Jewish terms.

I appreciate Ochs addressing the inadequacy of our moral decision-making. But Jewish moral discourse is a language. One does not need Rabbi Yosef's level of textual mastery to recognize it as an authentic effort to find moral guidance in traditional terms. Nor must one have a traditional commitment to halakhah as law in order to find his argument well grounded and compelling. Jewish educators should be able to present traditional ethical concepts so that students will learn to express themselves in authentically Jewish language. Even for those for whom the halakhah is not determinative, the classical process is still educationally viable.

Jewish moral discourse is a language that needs to be taught and not replaced with a "pidgin Torah." Ochs begins her essay justifying those who say "I'm not really religious but I like to think of myself as a good Jew." I am not in a position to judge who is or is not a good Jew, but I do believe that the relevant category is not "religious" or not, but "Jewishly educated" or not. And on that charge, I find it hard to understand how someone who does not understand the basics of Jewish moral discourse can make a claim to being a "good Jew." One may or may not be, but how would one know?

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December 2003 Tevet 5764 To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA www.shma.com