
Jewish Education as a Tool of Engagement

Rabbi Michael **Paley**

Franz Rosenzweig, the great Jewish philosopher, gave a stunning address at the opening of the *Judische Lehrhaus*—the highly successful adult education institute that became a center for the spiritual and intellectual regeneration of German Jewry—in Frankfurt in 1922. He noted, “It is a learning in reverse order, a learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life but the other way around; from life...back to the Torah. That is the sign of the time” (1955, p. 98).¹

Rosenzweig believed that, after more than a century of emancipation and enlightenment, the very glue that held the community together would have to change. He inherited two traditions: one of his great-grandfather’s yeshiva world and the other of the academy where he had learned a scientific approach to Jewish texts. Rosenzweig believed that learning, more than practice, should be the new foundation of Jewish communal existence and that such learning should come from the periphery and not from the center.

In the past, Jewish education had been focused on the transmission of revealed tradition and grounded in the explication of Jewish law. Now, it would be bathed in the new sunlight of encounter and even engagement. The text would not be in the hands of only rabbis, but would also emanate from a wide variety of professions and expertise anchored in “the world.” Rosenzweig believed that the modern concentration on the individual had disengaged the Jew from the community and that learning alone would reverse this process, reengaging the Jew into the communal.

Ten years ago, when John Ruskay offered his vision of the New York Jewish community in his “Looking Forward” address (see the Appendix), he posed the question of how to create caring communities “whose members, at the most elemental human level, reach out to one another in times of joy and in times of sorrow and are there for each other in the most fundamental human ways.” He affirmed that “moving forward, we will encourage the development of curriculum here and in Israel and throughout the world that will help young Jews better understand and appreciate our shared culture and our shared destiny.” He believed that this effort would “reduce divisions between religious and secular in New York and Israel and strengthen efforts to increase mutual understanding and tolerance.”

For most of the past ten years I have been the scholar-in-residence at the UJA-Federation of New York. This means that I have the privilege of teaching widely across the adult Jewish community of New York. Every day, I am engaged by adult students from all walks of life who are some of the best educated and most successful human beings who have ever walked this planet. They come in search of meaning and access to a Jewish tradition about which they care deeply

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¹Also of interest is Rosenzweig’s marvelous essay, in the same volume, titled “It is Time.”

but have only recently found an arena in which to explore. In every way I see my role on the continuum that was initiated by Rosenzweig and has been encouraged by Ruskay.

In educational circles, “a curriculum is the translation of knowledge into a learning experience” (Grant et al., 2004, p. 16). When adults come to class their interest is unique and peculiar. Most adult education classes in the city have a formal curriculum. At the end of each hour, participants should know more about art, music, or politics than when they came in. This is not rote learning and not directed at passing a test, gaining a certificate, or completing a degree. There are no exams and no grades, but one still should expect to learn a particular content. There are other kinds of classes, from gyms to film, in which the learner is primarily concerned with the experience, rather than a specific piece of information that they want to know. But the agenda for Jewish adult education is radically different.

LEARNING AND SUCCESS

Jonathan Sarna has noted that the turn of the 20th century constituted “a great awakening” (not unlike the Great Awakening of the 1820s) in the American Jewish community (2004, p. 135). At that time, the immigrant community was emerging from the intense religiosity of Eastern Europe, with its fantastic intellectual treasure, into a more secular community that devalued much of the wisdom that had been the cornerstone of that society. In America, secular skill-based education was what Lawrence Hoffman (1995) called “the communal project.” The job of the immigrant generation was to become Americans, and for the first time, education and skill acquisition would give them what we all now know as equal access to society. This must have been a thrilling discovery! The very Jewish value, learning, that was the center of the Eastern European experience could be translated into success in America. The obvious route, after this realization, was to marshal one’s energy to attend the finest universities and professional schools. The American Jewish community negotiated this challenge with astounding success. By the end of the 20th century, 90% of Jews attended college, with the very best universities having significant numbers of Jews.

But in the last ten years, these same Jews have finally had the leisure to look back and evaluate the quality of their Jewish education, which was generally based on the formula of a few hours in Hebrew school. The distance between these two aspects of life became daunting. There were no easy solutions to this dilemma, because the most sophisticated avenues for Jewish adult education—text-based, well taught, and intellectually rigorous—were locked into the world of Orthodox Judaism, where only the initiated could participate. The secular community had access to mostly academic courses, which could present a great deal of information but not the emotional attachments to Jewish expression that this group of Jews so sorely needed. In other words, there was no curriculum that translated Jewish knowledge into a learning experience, thereby connecting secular Jews to the excitement and intensity of the Jewish narrative and building a more modern, vibrant Jewish identity.

There is one more factor to consider in outlining the challenge to effective adult education in the communal context. Ruskay noted that “we are now able to shape our own destiny and even our Jewish identity as never before. Judaism

is no longer a condition imposed upon us; it is an intention we are invited to exercise.” Rosenzweig extends the context of this remark by explaining, “It is to a book, the Book, that we owe our survival. The learning of this Book became an affair of the people, filling the bounds of Jewish life, completely” (1955, p. 95). But Rosenzweig qualifies this statement; after the Emancipation, this Book, the Torah, sits on “the bookcase that has, at best, a single Jewish corner” (1955, p. 96). The question is, Can we reintegrate Torah into the wide range of elegant secular learning while maintaining its compelling nature?

INWARD FROM THE OUTSIDE: JUDAISM FOR THE UNINITIATED

Erica Brown, the scholar-in-residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, noted, in “Jewish Adult Education: Creating an Educational Democracy” (1996), that “Torah has had to compete with a myriad of other local classes, leisure activities and hobbies to attract.” If we continue to teach introductory classes without any demand on the whole person of the learner, then this project will not succeed in the transformation of Judaism for the 21st century. What we need is what Rosenzweig has prescribed. We must move from life to learning in an unprecedented way.

In the UJA-Federation context, the focus of the teaching has been to relate the expertise and skill of the learners to Torah. For instance, there is a class of music and entertainment executives who rely, in their work lives, on their extraordinary skill at listening to and tinkering with stories. They have demonstrated their ability to know what songs work and what music just will not sell. Instead of studying the classic set of stories from the book of Genesis with these students, we try to engage them in the study of Midrash and the liturgy, created by the rabbis who, in light of the destruction of the Temple, called on those same abilities. The rabbis at that time addressed a crisis of transition from a sacrificial cult to a community of prayer. Few in modern Jewish America think that they are praying for the return of sacrifices, but they must now be creative in re-creating what we *are* praying for and about, and we must have appropriate artistic settings for those prayers.

In these classes we compare Lewandowski’s elegant and ethereal music to the rich Eastern European *niggunim* (wordless melodies) of Shlomo Carlebach and ask the forbidden question, Which is better? How does the music shape the service? Do the images of the liturgy work as a drama in a modern society? In fact, Broadway producers who are Jewish are eager to take a crack at the liturgy themselves, to understand it, and sometimes suggest how to reset its theater. I once taught the Binding of Isaac to a very ill television executive. His first question was, What if Isaac were a girl? He then wanted to know, What is significant about the fact that the story takes place in the morning? Could we change it to the afternoon? I asked him why he wanted to change the story. He replied, “Because I want to change mine.”

Two hundred years ago, television executives, with their rich imaginations and bold literary strokes, would not have been able to crack the entertainment business, but they would have been the stars of the Beit Midrash. Real estate moguls of today would not have been able to own much land in Eastern Europe, but they would have been great at explaining the complex legal material in the Talmud tractate *Baba Batra*.

Now that American Jews have access to positions of power and authority, they have become even more interested and enriched by traditional material. However, if they merely sit and listen to an explication of the text, they will not become engaged with it. They must participate in the give-and-take of real talmudic discourse, which is open to the possibility that they might know as much or more than the rabbis. There is an arrogance to being modern; we have removed the veil of authority. Allowing highly educated professionals to confront and engage the creators of our tradition on an equal footing is not only highly enjoyable; it may even help squeeze us into the next era of Jewish thinking. This is not the only kind of effective learning, and it does demand a certain amount of entertainment. It has to be fun, quick, and broad in its use of popular culture. We are not recreating the yeshiva, but rather the emotional intensity of traditional Jewish learning as Rosenzweig's Lehrhaus attempted to do.

RULES AND MEANING

This type of teaching requires the consideration of two spectrums. The first spectrum is bounded by rules on the one hand and meaning on the other. Some Jews surely want to know the rules. What do I have to do on the Sabbath? How do I keep a kosher home? Rules are taught when greater observance of those rules is being advocated. But in Jewish communal education, learning must be directed away from the rules and toward the "meaning." Not how to keep a kosher home, or even why do so, but rather, how do the laws of kashrut affect the deep structures of your life and how do they shape your narrative, even if you never have any intention of keeping kosher?

This kind of learning is not easy to accomplish. Most Jewish education examines only pieces of the tradition. In one session, you learn about Passover and, in another, Yom Kippur. But what is the relationship between the two holidays? What is the story of the Jewish year? How does the flow of the calendar help the learners better understand the development of their own lives? The only way to teach the meaning is to have confidence that the students will come back and meet again and again. There is a patience to this style of Jewish learning that one cannot take for granted in fast-paced American society. To approach the tradition as an organic whole—so that participants see themselves as part of the Jewish meta-narrative—takes account of the place of the individual in the wider Jewish world. If we want this whole enterprise to work, we must explore how it all hangs together, how the Jewish story is the one thing that all Jews, religious and secular, share in common.

My hope for these classes is to equip the participants with a strong sense of the Jewish story and with the crucial demand that they participate in the shaping of its next chapter. Federation classes are one of the few ways in which the organization can give back for generous donations. But this is not the reason that people continue to come. More to the point, our learning experiences compel students to take responsibility with their leadership roles. The Jewish narrative is compelling, and when it unfolds for the students of these classes, they are more likely to be engaged in contributing to its next chapter. The learning allows them to see themselves as integral to the future of the Jewish story. These students are generally not interested in the formation of new communal norms and rules, but the meaning of our tradition and our community is central to their lives. There

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are many legitimate and successful strategies for adult Jewish education, but in the communal context, with its demands for pluralism and depth, it is that search for meaning, not the rules, that will guide our future.

RELIGIOUS INTENSITY AND HISTORICAL ACCURACY

The second spectrum is between religious intensity and historical accuracy. In Rosenzweig's time, the question of authenticity was central to the enterprise of Jewish scholarship. Where did these texts, rituals, and customs come from? The historical research into the accrual of Jewish tradition was crucial and interesting. The problem was that no one asked or considered the question of spiritual intensity. Jewish scholars were not charged with finding the emotional content in Jewish texts. Their task was to search out manuscripts and carefully fashion critical editions. This was a magnificent enterprise, but it was, as Rosenzweig pointed out, not what was demanded by increasingly modern Jews, who wanted the Jewish tradition to be interesting, whether it had historical authenticity or not. Modern Jews needed to emerge from a session of Jewish learning that engaged their entire identity, tied them to the past, and gave them a sense of courage about the future. They demanded that friendship and community be present in every class, or they would move on to the hundred other distractions that one can easily find in a big city.

Arthur Herzberg told me many times that "in the modern world, all Jews are Jews by choice." In designing the curriculum for the modern Jew, we must make careful methodological choices. Many of the best adult education programs, such as Me'ah, the Florence Melton Adult Mini School, and The Wexner Heritage Foundation, have put together extraordinary curricula based on a theory of Jewish literacy. This approach teaches a mastery of the building blocks of Jewish identity—including history, ideas, and traditions. The hope of these courses of study is that they will engage the learner in a more intense form of Jewish life and practice and will move that person toward a stronger sense of Jewish identity. There are other approaches that mostly come from the yeshiva world, which could be understood to be mimetic methods: they conceive of the teacher as a model of the tradition and see imitative learning as a way to move the class closer to observance (Soloveitchik, 1994). This style of teaching is more than book learning, and it is aimed at moving a person toward a new level of Jewish intensity. In this view, there is a right way of being Jewish, which lends a sense of confidence.

But federation teaching has a different challenge. Like the literacy programs, classes are wildly pluralistic and often encompass veteran learners and Jewish innocents. This is a great strength if it is the conversation itself that is the goal. But unlike those programs, federation learning is continual and can even become lifelong. In this aspect, it has more in common with traditional learning styles. But between these approaches, one could claim that an appropriate federation style is one of transformative learning, which intends to move beyond basic Jewish knowledge and to engage in Jewish communal life in all its dimensions. It is not the content alone; it is the engagement that continues to gather the participants to be partners in the long Jewish story.

Samuel Hugo Bergman (1961) summed up Rosenzweig's impact well:

In 1917 Rosenzweig had already published a brochure, It is Time, in which he dealt with the problem of Jewish culture.... For the Jew, "learning" is not the mere acquisition of

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knowledge; learning “begins where the subject matter ceases to be subject matter and is transformed into inner power.” As the Jew “learns,” he himself becomes a link in the chain of tradition and the subject of study for future generations; he has increased the substance of tradition even though he may have added only the most modest insight, interpretation, of idea. In Judaism, study is the process of perpetual self-renewal.

At UJA-Federation, the impact of both Franz Rosenzweig and John Ruskay on Jewish learning and community has been profound.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my friend and student, Yasha Magarik, who was my discussion partner in the preparation of this article.

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