

NORMAN LAMM

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"THE JEWISH EDUCATOR AND JEWISH EDUCATION -- FOUR MYTHS"

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I concede, at the outset, that I have many more questions than answers, and that contemplation of the subject assigned to me leaves me more puzzled than enlightened. At the beginning of this century, Ambrose Bierce defined "education" as "that which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding." The truth in that statement does not diminish with age. In an effort to avoid playing the fool, I shall make no pretense to greater understanding than I possess. I shall bear in mind what Alfred North Whitehead said after hearing Lord Bertrand Russell lecture on quantum theory at Harvard: "I congratulate Lord Russell for leaving the vast darkness of the subject unobscured."

Permit me to do just that: to respect the "vast darkness" of the subject, to make no effort to unravel the fundamental mystery that lies at the heart of the educative process and the teacher-student relationship. I shall merely endeavor to remove some of the obscurity covering the darkness and the mystery by discussing four myths or half-truths that have afflicted us this past half-century. Perceptive teachers recognize these sanctified untruths for what they

are; however, as long as they remain unidentified they impair the work of the Jewish educator -- and have done so this past half century and more.

MYTH NO. 1: "Children Don't Want to Learn." This unspoken assumption imposes an obvious handicap upon the teacher. But it is only a half-truth.

On a general, theoretical level, it is true that there is a natural resistance to school and learning. The Sages, commenting upon the reluctance of Israel to stay on at Sinai after the Revelation, compared the Israelites to ת'נין הבורח , a child fleeing from school. The aversion of children to learning is no new phenomenon. Yet, that can hardly be the whole story. It may be as much a reflection on the school system in the days of the Sages as an expression of some universal, innate anti-intellectualism. At any rate, such tendency is counter-balanced by a healthy and powerful curiosity, allied to a quest for meaningfulness and self-transcendence. I suggest an analogy from Hasidic literature. R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi teaches, in his *Tanya*, that the Jewish soul possesses an *ahavah tiv'it u-mesuteret*, an inborn and concealed love of God. Man is a *Homo religiosus*, a natural lover of God, but that love is an undeveloped talent which we are called upon to express or "reveal." What is true for *ahavat ha-Shem* is true for *ahavat ha-Torah*: there is an innate but undeveloped love of learning, and it is the task of the educator to "reveal" this hidden love.

This myth was more true than untrue at the beginning of this jubilee, when secularism reigned unchallenged and Judaism was treated with something worse than hostility -- namely, apathy and indifference. But today it is more fiction than fact. I believe that the Counter-Culture has had a lasting effect on the perception of Americans. It has altered our epistemological presuppositions. It has caused us to question our questions and doubt our doubts, and has left in its wake a residue of thirst for that which is suprarational, for that which transcends our senses, our logic, and our contrived technologies. It is a thirst which can be slaked with fetid waters from the putrid sewers of contemporary culture - or by the pellucid "living waters" of Torah and its transcendent message. We are now

in possession of a great opportunity, such as we have not had in close to fifty years.

MYTH NO. 2: "He Who Can, Does. He Who Cannot, Teaches."

This Shavian put-down is a piece of devastating cynicism that has had an incalculable effect in eroding the self-image of a noble profession. It has confirmed the worst fears of self-abnegating educators about their vocation -- that it is the last resort for incompetents, neer-do-wells, and malcontents.

This self-deprecation is largely a self-fulfilling prophecy, abetted by the hitherto inexorable expansion of economic opportunity, the changing perceptions of status, and the stubborn facts of materialism in a technological and urban culture. With Jews, this is aggravated by an assimilationsim which considers the whole Jewish enterprise as irrelevant, and teachers therefore superfluous.

Certainly in classical Jewish life, teaching had status-- but no money. The lack of financial advantage always posed a problem that evoked many attempted solutions -- but the status of the *talmid hakham* and the teacher remained unaffected. It is only in the modern age, with its hedonism and materialism, that status became linked to money, and the absence of the latter caused a diminution of the former.

As a result, we are left with a situation today which I do not believe is significantly different from that of fifty years ago: education attracts the best and the worst. The best - the most idealistic, the most committed, the most principled. And the worst too - those who couldn't make it in pre-med or pre-law, those who didn't have fathers or fathers-in-law with a family business. (For whatever the consolation is worth, the situation is worse in the Rabbinate, and I believe it is improving in teaching.)

The task of undoing this myth is the responsibility of educators - the best of them. There must, of course, be constant pressure to improve material means. But there must be a deliberate effort to avoid submitting to society's insidious confusion of salary and status. Propaganda for the recruitment of the potential

teachers of tomorrow must originate with teachers themselves, not only schools, philanthropists, and Federations. And it must be proved by a collective pride in our sacred profession.

MYTH NO. 3: "Our Problem is the Lack of New Techniques."

Supposedly, Jewish education is lagging behind general education because we are behind in research, in technology, and in applying new methods. The *bête noire* is usually some part of the "Establishment" - the Boards of Jewish Education, the Federations, or the wealthy philanthropists.

However, while I certainly do not gainsay the value of technique and technology and methods, this is more a counsel of despair than the consequence of sober analysis. It is a cop-out. Undoubtedly, certain techniques are helpful; some methods are more effective than others. But these cannot substitute for the personal, human encounter in the substantive, non-skill teaching whereby Judaism is transmitted from generation to generation. Perhaps here is the most important difference between general education and religious, especially Jewish, education: Jewish education is more than cognitive.

In remarkable metaphor, the Zohar teaches that within the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil there existed an *ilana de'mota* a Tree of Death. Hence, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he and his descendants after him were sentenced to mortality. But if so, how can man avoid having the fruit of his hard-earned knowledge lead to death? Only when knowledge is tasted in conjunction with the Tree of Life. And Tree of Life is the symbol of Torah -- "It is a tree of life to them that grasp it, and of them that uphold it everyone is rendered happy" (Prov. 3:17).

The abuse of science and technology in contemporary life has taught us with cataclysmic finality that knowledge is power -- but that it is not necessarily virtue; that, contrary to Socrates, *knowing* the good does not perforce lead to *doing* the good. The Tree of Knowledge encloses a Tree of Death.

The Torah tradition has always avoided, therefore, an interpretation of Torah study that would justify a theory of "knowledge for knowledge's sake."

Even the Lithuanian Mitnaggedic teachers, who emphasized the cognitive moment in the precept of *talmud torah*, saw Torah as an organum which was fundamentally spiritual, only that the key, the way, was primarily cognitive and intellectual.

Hence, the Jewish educator must be more than a Jewish scholar, though certainly that is indispensable. And he must be more than a Jewish scholar *cum* educational techniques. Above all, he must be a complete Jew, a complete human being -- a *mensh*.

Here is where the most intense efforts must be made in the attempt to improve the efficacy of the educator and the state of the art -- here, in the personality and development of the educator himself, and not primarily in the gadgets, devices, and methodology that mediate between teacher and student.

MYTH NO. 4: "We're Fighting a Losing Battle."

I refer here not to the occasional, fitful bout of pessimism that seizes the most sanguine of us every now and then, but rather to the seasoned conclusion that Judaism has no future in this country, that we are at best postponing the inevitable quietus for another few years. This is the most pernicious and baneful myth of all, one that insinuates itself slowly into the minds and hearts of the careless and the faithless. It was, I feel, the myth most responsible for the debacle of Jewish education early in the history of the American Jewish community.

No one can put his heart into a failing business, and what is Jewish education without heart? On who has no doubt that "we're fighting a losing battle," and considers himself/herself a person of integrity, had best look for a more promising occupation.

But how can the Jewish educator, surveying the often bleak scene both in this country and elsewhere, even in Israel, avoid generalizing about the future of the enterprise to which he is devoting his life -- and coming to a sad conclusion?

First, by a quick glance back at the past, when it was often feared that there would be no future. Now, I am not a sociologist, and I am neither a futurist

(the sophisticated contemporary term for a prophet) nor the son of a futurist, but an amateur historian who has learned something about jeremiads and gloomy predictions by the best of us - even in pre-Enlightenment days. Consider this: in the days of the Prophets, the worshippers of Baal predominated and the devotees of One God were a persecuted minority in Israel - and so Elijah was at the brink of despair. To offer some other examples haphazardly, and with disdain for chronology: Maimonides, in a letter to the "Sages of Lunel," expressed the nagging fear that they were the last of Jewish scholars left in the world -- this, before Nahmanides and R. Asher in Spain and the Tosafists in Germany and France. Closer to our own day, the famous head of the Yeshiva of Volozhin, R. Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin (known as "the Netziv," in his responsa, *Meshiv Davar*, No. 44), has to assure East European scholars that their's is not the worst generation in history. So, let there be no easy slide into despair. We are summoned to the historical perspective which gives us far more reason for hopefulness. (One thinks of the Israeli who had announced that he was an optimist, and upon being challenged as to why, if that be the case, he looks so worried, answered, "Do you think it is so easy to be an optimist?")

Second, such defeatism in what sociologists have called the "cognitive minority" is one of the ways that the majority culture seeks to overwhelm and undermine non-conformists and enforce a cultural homogeneity upon society. If I were to express this same thought agadically, I would find it ready-made for me in the Talmud (Sab. 89a). What caused the sin of the Golden Calf? The tradition answers that Moses was late by some six hours in descending from the mountain. Still, the Israelites were not upset until Satan confused the world by projecting onto the clouds the picture of Moses lying in his coffin. It was then that they cried out, "Moses is ~~dead~~!," and proceeded to that abomination which became the archetypical sin in Jewish consciousness.

Third, no matter what our orientation within Judaism or towards Jewish education, one noble dogma unites all of us: that our future has been secured

for us in the past; that the covenant between God and Israel has guaranteed the eternal existence of the Jewish people and its return to Eretz Israel. We are covenanted to survive, to succeed in the end.

So, it all boils down to faith - faith in the surpassing endurance of the sacred legacy we are commissioned to pass on; faith in the ultimate success of the enterprise of Jewish education-- which engages our labors, our thought, and our destiny; faith in the resonance which the Torah we teach will find in the young people we educate. Or, to state the articles of faith of the Jewish educator in the last quarter of this century as antitheses to the four myths:

1. Faith that there is in the heart of the Jewish child something that responds to Torah.
2. Faith that he who can, does; and he who can best - teaches.
3. Faith that the greatest contribution to Jewish education comes not from techniques but from teachers; not from methods, but from men and women and hearts and souls.
4. Faith that despite all difficulties, we are determined that we shall not be defeated; that we shall counter pessimism with persistence; that the covenant continues; that *עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל ה'* because *אֲבִינוּ ה'* and that therefore the Torah is a *תּוֹרַת חַיִּים*.

It is this faith which will keep us "in business" and will guarantee that fifty years hence Jewish educators will assemble for another hand-wringing, yet heart-warming celebration - unless, of course, the Messiah comes first.

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