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"THE CHALLENGES OF JEWISH
EDUCATION IN THE 80'S"

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Any discussion of Jewish education in the coming decade stands to benefit much from Dean Henchey's cogent analysis of the general educational scene. Because Jews do not live in a vacuum, or even -- in the open, democratic, and pluralistic society of North America -- in hermetically sealed enclaves, what he has to say about the contours of society as they are beginning to emerge for the 1980's, must clearly enrich any analyses and prescriptions that we may offer for Jewish education in particular.

However, because of the peculiar nature of our community and our concerns, our focus must simultaneously be somewhat narrower and somewhat broader. It must be narrower, because as a minority (irrespective of the degree of our creativity) we are bound to operate within the social parameters, communal structures, and cultural paradigms which our whole society sets for us. Perhaps it would be more courageous to speak of rejecting these structures and paradigms and reaching out boldly for something radically different. But realistically, that will not happen, certainly not when one considers how intimately and intricately North American Jewry is tied in with the mainstream of Western civilization and, even more, with the cutting edge of its most "progressive" elements. The best we can do -- and this must never be denigrated -- is to seek out creatively those nooks and crannies within these structures which we consider more amenable to Jewish development, more accessible to Jewish aspiration, and more compatible with

Jewish values and principles. It is here that collective innovation is possible for us.

A

Our focus must be broader because our educational concerns embrace not only the transmission of knowledge -- of the cognitive and abstract elements of culture per se -- but the whole gamut of Torah, which is as broad as life itself. For the Jewish educator, character and religious conduct and morality are not merely the consequences of education, but the very substance and stuff of education. Moral behavior and the spiritual life are the telos or ^{goal} ~~purpose~~ of all of education: Takhlit kochavah yeshuvah ~~transformation of the~~ ^{goal} ~~purpose~~ (Ber. 17b): The purpose of wisdom is repentance (the ^{spiritual} transformation of personality) and good deeds (practical moral conduct).

B

In attempting to foresee problems and prospects of Jewish education in the decade to come, I begin with a sense of futility: no matter how wide our data base, no matter how perspicacious our insights, no matter how acute our analyses, we are only guessing and we can have no assurance that we are on target. I recall the comments that the eminent philosopher, Professor A. N. Whitehead, made after a guest lecture by Lord Russell at Harvard University on quantum theory: "I congratulate Lord Russell for leaving the vast darkness of the subject unobserved." I would not want to leave the vast darkness of Jewish education obscured by a mass of verbiage. That vast darkness will always remain, not only because the future is impenetrable and unknown, but because we are dealing with education, and education concerns the soul of man, and the soul of man always remains a mystery.

To presume to know enough about education to predict its course is both arrogant & misleading. Whatever one says on the subject must be tentative & halting, & must be pre-founded in the cradle of intellectual modesty.

Even if we read it and even
aggressively asserting that the degree
of pluralism qualifies the ignorant,
the Jewishly illiterate, so the under-
ground as South American people with
all
of them.

One of the most fundamental questions which Jewish educators will have to confront is that of motivation. This has been a perennial problem, but it is getting more difficult of late. Why, after all, should a young person study Torah when it is so easy to be accepted, successful, and recognized without a whisper of Jewish learning? It is even possible to attain eminence in national and international Jewish leadership while remaining profoundly ignorant of Jewish classics, practice, or values. Why study Torah when it hardly articulates with anything in secular life, when it has barely any resonance in the general studies which a child undertakes for all of his youth in our society?

For most of the 70's, there seemed to be certain segments of Jewish society for whom that question was not quite as acute as it sounds. This was the era of the ascendancy of the counter-culture, when a number of Jewish young people rebelled against the Jewish "establishment" and its insensitivity to cultural and spiritual values, by seeking out Jewish study in one form or another. This was the period of ethnic self-assertion, of the proliferation of Jewish studies courses in universities throughout North America, and a conscious rejection of many of the symbols and institutions of our technopolitan society.

That period, however, is quickly passing away -- and I rue its untimely demise. The new generation ^{80's} that is appearing on our campuses ^{has been} is as humorless and as intensive and serious as the last one -- but about altogether different things. They are overconcerned with their vocations, their professions, their

security, their social acceptance. With the shift from marijuana to booze has come the change from Marcuse to bucks, from society to self.

Our tasks, therefore, promise to be more difficult, not less so. With the upsurge in professionalism going down to high school and even lower, culture as such is in eclipse, and Jewish learning especially so. The task of Jewish educators will be to overcome this problem, lest Jewish learning become the private preserve of a priestly class -- once rabbis, now roshei yeshiva and, even more, university professors of Judaic studies: the new monastic order, the Essenes of the Academy.

Jewish educators, however, know that in order to achieve Jewish learning for its own sake, it is not necessary to begin with the ultimate desideratum. They will have to search, as they have always had to, for some means of engaging the student's interest, each one at his or her own level, and then to create in the student a genuine curiosity and quest for Torah and Jewish learning. This is how a number of early 19th century sages interpreted the talmudic phrase

תורה ראש ופסוק
ואשר לא תשרה פנים -- that one should always engage in the study of Torah and the performance of good deeds even if not for their own sake, for as a result he will ultimately perform them for their own sake. The Rabbis emphasized the word *תמיד* -- "always": one must always begin for ulterior motives, for such is the nature of the human ego. But after having begun in this manner, the creative achievement is to pursue these interests for their own sakes rather than for external benefits.

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and ordered, this 2nd problem
may well help solve the first:

But important as study and educational motivation are in themselves, they are not our principal problem. What we must address, above all else, is what Victor Frankl has called the "noogenic vacuum" in the life of contemporary man. The real problem with which we must grapple is a metaphysical one: the lack of transcendent anchorage or roots for all ^{values and all} of life. Our students and the homes they come from -- and we too! -- are afflicted by this creeping emptiness, by this axiological void, which demands to be filled. The central mission for Jewish educators in the 80's ^{is} will be to fill this void satisfactorily. I submit that it will not be possible to do ^{so} ~~it~~ with nationalism, e.g., Zionism, alone; not by language alone, whether Hebrew or Yiddish; not by a warmed-over liberalism and meliorism presented as the totality of Judaism; not by the academic study of Judaism alone, for if man does not live by bread alone, neither does he thrive by text alone. Our response will have to be a spiritual one, a religious one, a metaphysical one. If we fail to answer that need, then we are bankrupt. I am not now opting for one answer above other answers. But we shall certainly have to provide the raw material from which students can construct an answer for themselves to such questions as: What is life all about? What am I doing in this world? Is it worth dying for anything? Why not suicide?

These questions have come to the fore in Western society at least for the past ^{forty} thirty years. We probably can pinpoint the time as 1949, when Karl Mannheim published his essays on "Diagnosis of our Time" and "The Crisis in Valuation." He recognized that the twin sources of the deep crisis and malaise

in Western civilization were the erosion of legitimation and the loss of meaning. As legitimation became attenuated, the usual sources of authority began to lose their significance -- from presidents and prime ministers to popes and professors. (Teleology has followed theology into the dustbin of society!) The sense of purpose is gone. Our lives and our acts are hollowed rather than hallowed. We look about in vain for something worthy of our commitment and our love. We have relativized good and evil and trivialized reward and punishment. God has been de-throned by man, and as our other idols have been found to have clay feet, apotheosized man has been discovered to be flat-footed.

Our struggle, therefore, must be to present Torah as the source of legitimacy, authority, value, and validity. Unless we strive to do so, all our other educational efforts will be in vain. We must ^{now} submit to the benevolent trivialization of Jewish learning as something marginal and merely ethnic, a kind of intellectual equivalent of gefilte fish. Now, that seems to be an impossibly difficult task, especially in ^{our} an age in which hedonism is the unspoken and unchallenged assumption of the times. Indeed, the metaphysical cataclysm which we have sustained from the loss of legitimation and authority in itself gives rise to hedonism. As Amitai Etzioni wrote a few years ago, "Hedonism further develops when norms which define meanings disintegrate without being replaced by new norms. Hedonism thrives amidst a spread of normlessness" ("The Search for Political Meaning," in The Center Magazine, March/April 1972).

Yet the task is not quite as hopeless as it seems. Man will always be pleasure-seeking, but hedonism's rule need not last forever. Society, like man, soon becomes satiated and the metaphysical drang

too must be satisfied. Indeed, a number of perceptive sociologists have pointed out that the current success of various exotic cults may be the result of the collapse of patriotism in North America. As young people became disillusioned with government, what was really the civic religion of America disappeared, and young people began to look for other sources of meaning. As long as the human soul is restless~~ness~~, as long as young people are impatient with what they find given to them by their parents, Judaism will find entrée into the marketplace of competing ideologies. As we get our students to doubt their doubts, no longer to be pleased with their pleasures, and to search for something beyond, Judaism stands a chance, and the Jewish educational enterprise is not foredoomed to defeat.

I come now to the next element. Young Jews are beginning to search not only for transcendent roots, but also for historical ones. They are looking both for what is above them and behind them. The era of ethnic assertiveness shows no signs of abating, and even though in the United States Jews -- who form one tenth of one percent of mankind -- are not an "official minority," there will still be many young Jews and Jewesses who will at least wonder where they come from, what kind of people preceded them, whether and what sort of history they have.

The kind of education to which our students are subjected in secular high schools and colleges is not always conducive to a search, let alone respect, for antecedents and roots. In teaching the principle of criticism, which is so crucial to all of modern culture and science, our society has overstated the case to its own horrendous disadvantage. We have encouraged

in our students an attitude of debunking the past, so that they are misled into thinking that all that is past is vacuous, and all that is new must be superior -- what Jacques Maritain called the sin of "chronolatry," the idolatry of the newest in time. Teachers -- especially young assistant professors -- have forgotten that without links to intellectual authority, our students cannot know what they are criticizing nor can they respect the complexity of all true criticism. We have conditioned a generation -- or two or three -- to dismiss the authority of the past without beginning to understand it.

What has been the result of this educated ignorance? Philip Rieff has written,

To be radically contemporaneous, to be sprung loose from every particular symbolic, is to achieve a conclusive, unanswerable failure of historical memory. This is the uniquely modern achievement. Barbarians have never before existed. At the end of this tremendous cultural development, we moderns shall arrive at barbarism. Barbarians are people without historical memory. Barbarism is the real meaning of radical contemporaneity. Released from all authoritative pasts, we progress towards barbarism, not away from it. (Fellow Teachers, Harper and Row, 1973, p. 39)

In the 1980's, Jewish educators will have to make war on this contemporary barbarism, and present to our students the Gestalt of the Jewish past as the fountainhead of the Jewish present: its great teachers, sages, prophets, poets, philosophers, scholars, saints. They need not all be presented as unquestioned authorities, but -- as authorities, as figures who spoke something worth listening to, as personalities whose lives are worth probing, as teachers whose doctrines are worth considering. This means more than the dry recitation of historical dates

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and facts. It means developing an attitude of critical reverence, of intelligent love.

The corollary of this attitude to the past that we must inculcate in our students is, as well, an orientation towards the future. If being Jewish is to have meaning and to be desirable, it must be set within a framework of the eternity of the Jewish people. No matter how great the trials and how severe the crises, we must never let that hope falter in our consciousness or the consciousness of those entrusted into our care. No matter what the cataclysms of the past thirty or forty years, no matter how strenuous the vicissitudes we are now experiencing, the Jewish people will survive and will thrive. Yes, there are many dangers -- A.N. Whitehead, whom I mentioned before, once said that, "it is the business of the future to be dangerous" ^{but} -- we shall prevail. With the respect for the past and faith in the future, the present can be borne with dignity.

Permit me to mention an interesting and relevant historical allusion to summarize the last several points I have made. Babylon, what is today Iraq, from the 3rd to the 10th or 11th century, was the cradle of the great Oral Law of our people. During most of this time, they experienced a kind of autonomy or semi-autonomy, which saw the flourishing of the great academies of Sura and Pumpedita. The political chief of Babylonian Jewry was the Resh Galuta or Exilarch. It was a time of widespread education, even what we today call adult or continuing education. Lectures were delivered in Torah and Talmud before large groups of people. The most prestigious of all the lectures delivered

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during the year was given by the Resh Galuta in the presence of the Geonim and the distinguished officials of Babylonian Jewry. Because of its prominence, it was called Rigla Di'Resh Galuta, the Holiday of the Exilarch. And this always fell on the Sabbath on which Lekh-Lekha was read. Why this particular Saturday? The late Professor Samuel K. Mirsky offers the following explanation.

In the Tana Di'Bei Eliyahu we are presented with a talmudic conception of historiography, and we are told that the 6,000 years of human history are divided into three cycles of approximately 2,000 years each. The first is called Tohu, or chaos, because during these two millenia the spirit had not yet crystallized in the world and man's moral life was chaotic. The second cycle is called Torah, because during this time man began to show receptivity to God, and God Himself became more accessible to man. The last 2,000 years, during which we now live, is called Mashiach, or the days of the Messiah. During these days the forces of Torah and Tohu battle for supremacy and upon the outcome depends the redemption of the history of mankind. The Messiah will come when Torah will prevail over Tohu. What marks the transition between these various periods? Tohu begins with the creation, of course, and Mashiach ends with the entire 6,000 year period. How about Torah? We are told that this great 2,000 years cycle begins from the time that Abraham and Sara leave Haran until the time of the founding of the great Babylonia academies by Rav in the third century of the Common Era. It is therefore on this Sabbath that the Resh Galuta, as the head of Babylonian Jewry, preached, because he was the successor ^{to} of Rav and because it

is in Lekh Lekha that we read of Abraham and Sarah leaving Haran. But this leaving of Haran by our first patriarch and matriarch is related to Torah because of a specific verse: Ve'ha-nefesh asher asu be'Haran. Literally this means that Abraham and Sarah took with them not only their possessions but also the "people" they acquired in Haran, that is, the servants. However, tradition ascribes a deeper meaning to the verse and tells us: Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women to the belief in one God.

Torah cannot flourish amongst the people to whom it was given unless they are willing to leave their homes and win souls, unless they are ready to reach out. Jewish education must be not only a vocation but ^{not only a service but a search;} a mission; it must be a proselytizing profession, bringing Torah to Jews, for one needs the other. Without that sense of mission and outreach, Jewish educators will be condemned to sterile disquisitions on methodology and to brooding over the lack of interest in the talent and knowledge they bring to their tasks. Unless we are willing to bring our hearts as well as our heads to our duties, we shall deserve nothing better.

To summarize, then, I see the challenges to Jewish education in the 80's as consisting of:

- * the proper motivation of our students to the study of Torah
- * presentation of Jewish learning as primarily metaphysical rather than strictly cognitive in meeting the thirst for the transcendent, in providing legitimation, and in displacing hedonism as the reigning philosophy
- * in overcoming contemporary barbarism by providing authoritative

historic roots and holding forth a vision of the future.

After concluding my thinking and the organization of my ideas, I discovered to my delight that I had been anticipated in precisely these points. Dean Henchey's wise and erudite paper concludes with a wistful compliment to the community of Jewish educators. He wonders if we are not already off to a good start. He sees three positives in the enterprise of Jewish education: a sense of history, memory of origins and community; the experience of Exodus and faith in the risky future; the role of the prophet -- eliciting meaning from apparent meaninglessness, hope from suffering, the whole from the parts, the future from the past.

If, as a friendly and wise outsider, he believes that we can do it, that we already are beginning to do it, then I feel more confident than ever that despite all difficulties and ~~obstacles~~ and ~~resistances~~, we shall succeed and we shall prosper.

Let us proceed with fear and trepidation, but with hope and courage and confidence.