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March 12, 1990

Professor Israel Scheffler
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Dear Professor Scheffler:

I understand that I will be receiving notification shortly from Seymour Fox regarding payment of your fee for work for the Commission on Jewish Education in North America. In anticipation of that request, and in order to expedite payment, I am writing to request that you send me your social security number.

Very truly yours,

Virginia F. Levi

Virginia F. Levi
Commission Staff

[redacted]

Judaism's Philosophy of Education *

Israel Scheffler

Introduction

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of education in traditional Jewish thought. Learning is central to Judaism, a religious duty, a source of ultimate meaning, a form of worship. The motivation assigned to education is quite different from that which is prevalent in modern systems: It is not to be pursued for the sake of career, or vocation, or self-development, or society or national glory. Rather all else that Jews do is to be thought of as pursued for the sake of it. "Torah" indeed, is wrongly translated as "law". It means teaching, and represents an ultimate value in Judaism, inextricably bound both to Israel and the Almighty, according to the maxim "Israel, the Torah, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, are one."

So pervasive is education in Jewish thought that it is impossible to separate it from the complex of religion and culture as a distinguishable component. A recent writer [redacted] remarks that "education was so much a part of Jewish thought and way of living that it was taken for granted; Jewish Sages considered it hardly necessary to set down an articulated plan of its principles and practices. In a similar sense, the advanced conceptions of social ethics, abundant in Jewish classical writings, were not preserved as an organized system but rather as dynamic expressions of how to live". There is thus no explicit philosophy of education, in the contemporary sense, to be recounted.

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ed D. Marsden & E. S. Shapiro

However, certain fundamental emphases, distilled from the classical writings, provide a thread of educational continuity from the earliest times to the contemporary period. Among such emphases the following have been suggested: 1) that study is essential, 2) that "human character is improvable through education, 3) that learning and doing must be integrated," 4) that education is a continual process, from cradle to grave," 5) that education is social, 6) that education must start with the very young," 7) that individual differences among pupils must be recognized," 8) that responsibility for education rests with the parents and the community, 9) that training for work is both essential and honorable."[2]

These emphases provide a general sense of the direction of Jewish thought on educational matters. But they are too broad, in themselves, to be very informative. What I propose to do here is to illustrate some of the main conceptions of postbiblical Jewish thought on education, by drawing on Talmudic or Midrashic passages relating to the following four rubrics: 1) The Conduct of the Scholar 2) Teachers and Students 3) The Learning Process, and 4) the Content of Learning. In these passages we may begin to discern the outlines of a Rabbinic philosophy of education embodied in lore and practice, which has not only been enormously important historically, but which is, I believe, of great interest for present thought as well.

1) The Conduct of the Scholar

I begin with this topic for it presents, in a concrete way, the ideal outcome of learning as embodied in character and conduct. The basic point is this: religion, morality and good manners are to be combined in the everyday conduct of life, in order to win both Divine and human approval. The greatest responsibility rests upon the scholars, as representatives of the Torah."

The picture of the scholar is drawn in terms that may seem to the modern ear not homogeneous, including moral and religious aspects as well as those pertaining to social tact and etiquette. To the Rabbis, these elements formed indeed an indissoluble whole comprising character: Mind, soul and conduct are all integral parts of such character. Thus the modern concept of moral education as distinct from cognitive education is alien to the Rabbinic conception. The scholar is to be humble, truthful, and tactful. He is characterized as "meek, humble, diligent, intelligent, submissive, beloved by all, humble of spirit before members of the household, and sin fearing. He inquires after everyone's welfare in terms of his vocation. He sits at the feet of the wise; no one finds displeasing traits in him; he questions according to the subject matter and answers to the point. The scholar loves the Torah and honors it. He keeps aloof from everything hideous and from whatever seems hideous; he does not slander his neighbor. He performs his daily acts in accordance with good manners....

("A scholar does not eat or drink while standing, nor does he wipe off his plate or lick his fingers, or belch in front of his neighbor. He is

moderate in conversation, laughter, sleep and pleasure.., [redacted], A scholar reveals his character in five ways: 1) by his purse, 2) by his wine-cup, 3) by his anger, 4) by his attire, and 5) by his speech.... No scholar should seat himself before his elders are seated. He should be decorous in eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, putting on shoes, walking, dressing, speaking, and in performing his duties.... When his needy and poor neighbor appeals to him for help, he does not refuse him. If his colleagues have insulted him, he makes peace with them, for peace is noble and strife is despicable." [4] [redacted]

The particular virtues are also integral; they are not to be thought of as belonging just to a single department of life but as radiating into every area. Thus, humility is described as an <u>intellectual</u> virtue, not simply as a <u>general moral</u> trait:

> Be pliable like the reed which the wind blows hither and thither, for the Torah is preserved only by him who is humble in spirit. And why is the Torah likened to water?: To indicate that just as the course of the water is not towards high places but rather towards low places, similarly the Torah is preserved only by him who is humble in spirit. [5] [redacted]

Arrogance, it seems, is not merely a moral deficiency. It is also an <u>intellectual</u> fault, an educational obstacle. It produces rashness,

impulsiveness, lack of respect for the opinions of others, and even untruthfulness. Thus we are told that there are seven marks of the uncultured:

> He speaks before him who is greater than he in wisdom; he interrupts the speech of his fellowman; he is hasty to answer; he does not question according to the subject matter, and does not answer to the point; he speaks upon the last subject first and upon the first last; he says, "I understand" when he does not understand; and he does not acknowledge the truth.[16]

By contrast, the student is advised:

> Sit at the feet of scholars and hearken unto their words. Do not be hasty to answer, and plan your answer according to the subject matter. Answer the first point first and the last point last. Acknowledge the truth, and do not speak before him who is greater in wisdom than you.[17]

Acknowledging the truth means also avoiding false claims to its possession. The scholar is not to deem himself a source of absolutely certain knowledge; he is not a dogmatist. He is advised, on the contrary:

> Accustom yourself to say "I do not know", lest you be led to tell a falsehood and be apprehended".[18]

The scholar is, moreover, to be scrupulous with himself as to his own level of understanding:

> If you desire to understand the Torah, do not say regarding that which you do not understand, I do understand; when you are taught and you do not understand, be not ashamed to say, I do not understand. If someone inquires of you about something in which you are not well versed, be not ashamed to say, I do not know. [redacted]

The scholarly ideal is, then, that of a seeker of understanding and wisdom rather than that of a seer who claims the certain possession of it. There is in principle no difference between scholar and student. The very term for scholar, i.e. תַּלְמִיד חָכָם, means 'wise student'. Teaching another person is not separable from teaching oneself. Knowledge is conceived not as a matter of possession but rather a matter of quest. The rejection of dogmatism is succinctly expressed as follows:

> Love the "perhaps", but hate the "and if so?".
>
> Rabbi Hidka states it differently: Love the "perhaps"; but hate the "what of it?" [redacted]

Here we have a commitment both to the importance of the quest for knowledge and to its never ending scope. Even if we never get beyond the "perhaps", we must never despair and say "so what?"

2) Teachers and Students

We have already seen a very important idea, i.e., that the teacher is not separable from the learner. He is himself a learner.

He is more advanced than his student, but he must always retain a helpful and patient attitude toward his student. Thus we are told:

> Raba said: If you see a student who finds his studies as difficult as iron it is because his teacher does not take a kindly attitude toward him.[11]

Hillel declares that:

> the diffident cannot learn nor can the impatient teach.[12]

The pupil must be able to press his questions, not to be too diffident to express his doubts and lacks. But then the teacher needs to take such expressions seriously and deal with them patiently:

> Rabbi Perida had a pupil with whom he found it necessary to rehearse a lesson four hundred times before he learned it. One day the Rabbi was called away to perform a charitable act. Before he left, however, he repeated the lesson at hand the usual number of times but, on this occasion, his pupil failed to learn it. "Why", asked Rabbi Perida, "is this time different from any other time?"
>
> The pupil replied, "Because, from the moment the master was summoned to discharge another duty, I diverted my attention, and every now and then I said to myself, "Soon the master will get up, soon the master will get up." "Well, then," said the Rabbi, "pay attention and I shall teach it to you again."

> And he repeated the lesson a second four hundred times and the pupil learned it. Whereupon a Heavenly voice came forth and said to Rabbi Perida: What reward do you want? You may add four hundred years to your life, or you and your generation may merit the world to come. The latter, said R. Perida. Whereupon the Holy One, Blessed Be He, said: Give him both rewards. [13]

The general relation between teacher and pupil must be one of mutual respect. This does not mean that there are no distinctions of educational level and experience to be acknowledged. Thus, R. Jose, son of Judah of Kephar Babli, says:

> He who learns from the young, to what is he like? To one who eats unripe grapes, or drinks wine from the vat. And he who learns from the old, to what is he like? To one who eats ripe grapes, or drinks old wine. [14]

Rabbi Meir, however, disagrees with R. Jose on this matter, saying pointedly:

> Look not at the flask, but at what it contains: there may be a new flask full of old wine, and an old flask that has not even new wine in it. [15]

Age is not a decisive criterion of scholarly or educational maturity. One hopes that the older scholar will in general have gained from his greater experience. The ultimate test, however, is not chronological age

but intellectual capacity and ripeness. We must all be prepared to learn from whoever can teach us, young or old. As Ben Zoma said: "Who is wise? He who learns from all men, as it is said, 'From all my teachers I have gotten understanding'".[16] [redacted]

This point is made strikingly in a passage which reads:

> He who learns from his fellow single chapter,
> a single rule, a single verse, a single expression,
> or even a single letter, ought to pay him honor.[17] [redacted]

Honor and respect are, however, reciprocal:

> Rabbi Elazar, the son of Shammua, said [redacted]: Let the honor
> of thy disciple be as dear to thee as thine own.[18] [redacted]

Both master and disciple are engaged in the common enterprise of study. It is this common effort which confers on <u>each</u> a mantle of honor; the teacher's guidance and the pupil's efforts to learn are bound together by the activity of study which is their shared purpose.

The teacher's honored role also implies serious responsibilities. His influence in guiding the understanding of the Torah presupposes the utmost meticulousness and care. Thus R. Judah, son of Ilai , declares:

> Be cautious in teaching, for an error in teaching may
> amount to presumptuous sin.[19] [redacted]

Teaching is not reserved for a special group of people. Everyone who has learned has the duty to teach:

> Rabbi Yochanan said: He who learns Torah and does not teach
> it is like a myrtle that grows in the desert,[20] [redacted]
> [redacted]
> [redacted]

An important theme in the thought of the Rabbis is the relation of study and doing, of theory and practice. One aspect of this theme is the recognition that the study of Torah must take place in the practical world. Thus the Rabbis taught that:

> A father is required to teach his son Torah, and also to teach him a trade. R. Judah says: Whoever fails to teach his son a trade, it is as if he has taught him to rob.[21] [redacted]

It follows that the teacher is to enable the student not only to learn the Torah but also to acquire a livelihood. The teacher is [redacted] both a religious and a practical mentor.

And R. Elazar, son of Azariah tells us that:

> Where there is no flour [redacted] there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no flour [redacted].[22] [redacted]

The sublimity of learning depends on material sustenance, which is itself fulfilled and ennobled by study.

A further aspect of the theme of theory and practice has to do with the [redacted] application of the Torah itself, rather than its relation to the learning of a trade. Torah is essential to the conduct of the religious life; it is impossible to live such a life properly without the guidance of learning. In this vein, Hillel says:

(is no merely theoretical matter, since it) (The teacher in effect offers religious guidance and not only religious doctrine.)

> An empty-headed man cannot be a sin-fearing man, nor can an ignorant person be truly pious.[23] [redacted]

From this point of view, study might be said to be more important than doing. But ~~if one were to say this, however, it must not be taken to imply that it can be separated from doing and~~ exalted in itself apart from its influence on conduct. Thus the Rabbis asked:

(It would not follow that study could be separated from doing and)

> Which is greater, study or doing? R. Tarfon answered: Doing. R. Akiba answered: Study. The majority agreed that study is greater, for study leads to doing.[24]

[redacted]

Although proper conduct is impossible without study and although study is valuable in promoting doing, there is an ultimate balance to be struck between the two. In such a balance, conduct outweighs, not only because it affords the final justification for study but because it enables learning itself to endure. Thus, R. Hanina ben Dosa said:

> He whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom shall endure; but he whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom will not endure.[25] [redacted]

And R. Elazar ben Azaryah likens the one whose wisdom exceeds his deeds to:

> a tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few; and the wind comes and plucks it up and overturns it upon its face,

while he whose deeds exceed his wisdom is like:

> a tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, it cannot be stirred from its place.[26] [redacted]

[redacted]

To this point, we have been concerned with general relations between teacher and student, and with the bearing of learning on conduct. We now note the Rabbis' recognition of individual differences in the capacities and proclivities of students, and their special acknowledgment of critical attention on the part of the learner. Thus,

> There are four qualities in disciples: He who quickly understands and quickly forgets, his gain disappears in his loss; he who understands with difficulty and forgets with difficulty, his loss disappears in his gain; he who understands quickly and forgets with difficulty, his is a good portion; he who understands with difficulty and forgets quickly, his is an evil portion.[27]

Mere glibness and facility are not sufficient; it is the durability of learning that is of paramount value. Analogously, mere absorptive capacity is not the highest virtue in a student (such a student is compared to a sponge by the Rabbis), but rather discrimination and selection in what is learned from one's teachers. This is a remarkable valuation of critical thinking by the student even in the course of study at the feet of the wise: Thus:

> There are four qualities among those who sit before the wise: they are like a sponge, a funnel, a strainer or a sieve. A sponge, which sucks up everything, a funnel which lets in at one end and out at the other; a strainer, which lets the wine pass out and retains the lees; a sieve which lets out the bran and retains the fine flour.[28]

One sort of difference among good students is the subject of several discussions, and the Rabbis themselves are divided on the question of relative merit. Which is more valuable, erudition or analytical originality? Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai is described as listing the good

qualities of his five students, among whom Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is praised as being "a cemented cistern, which loses not a drop", while Elazar ben Arakh is praised as being "like a spring flowing with ever-sustained vigor". R. Yochanan is then the subject of two reports as to his relative estimate of these virtues. One report quotes him as saying:

> If all the sages of Israel were in one scale of the balance and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all.

On the other hand, Abba Saul reports him as holding that:

> If all the sages of Israel, together with Eliezer ben Hyrcanus were in one scale of the balance and Elazar ben Arakh in the other, he would outweigh them all.[29] [redacted]

We find this theme elsewhere as well: [redacted]

> A vacancy occurred in the position of Head of the Academy and the students found it difficult to decide upon a successor. Some preferred R. Joseph for his remarkable store of knowledge. Others preferred Rabbah for his dialectical ability. The former was called "Sinai", the latter "uprooter of mountains". The students decided to ask the counsel of the Academy in Palestine. The reply came: All must come to the owner of the storehouse for food.[30]

[redacted]

3) The Learning Process

The process of education is social; it can only be effective when it is conducted with others. Thus it is said:

> Form groups for the purpose of study, for Torah can be acquired only in a group.[31]

And again:

> R. Nehorai (some say this is R. Elazar b. Arakh, the "original" scholar, student of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai referred to earlier) says, Wander forth to a home of the Torah -- and say not that the Torah will come after thee -- for there thy associates will establish thee in the possession of it; and lean not upon thine own understanding.[32]

The need to seek out a community of teachers and scholars is perhaps to be seen in the words of José ben Yoezer, of Zeredah, who said: "Let thy house be a meeting house for the wise, sit amidst the dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst."[33] As one of my own teachers, Mr. Zusevitz, interpreted this passage, it does not mean "Make your home into a salon for scholarly meetings", for who can do this? Rather, the sense is "Find out where scholars meet to study the Torah, and make your home there. Follow the Torah actively, and do not expect it to follow you."

Study is most effective when it is pursued from an early age. In a striking simile, R. Elisha ben Abuya says:

> If one learns as a child, what is it like? Like ink written on clean paper. If one learns as an old man, what is it like? Like ink written on blotted paper.[34]

The curriculum is to be systematically organized in accordance with age. R. Judah B. Tema said:

> At five years the age is reached for the study of Scripture, at ten for the study of the Mishnah, at thirteen for the fulfillment of the commandments, at fifteen for the study of the Talmud.[35] [redacted]

[redacted]

Study is to be made steady and continuous. Thus Shammai says:

> Fix a period for thy study of the Torah[36] [redacted]

and Hillel warns:

> Do not say, when I have leisure I will study; perchance thou wilt have no leisure.[37] [redacted]

The point is not only that study is to be built into the ordinary schedule of life, and that lack of leisure is to be rejected as an excuse for avoiding study. The point is also that any such excuse will breed others, unless a momentum of disciplined study is established. Once the routine of study is broken, there will be many pretexts for further neglect. Thus R. Meir warns:

> If thou neglectest the Torah, many causes for neglecting it will present themselves to thee.[38] [redacted]

Nor should you be despairing over the immense range of things to be learned, for completeness in learning is a false ideal; it cannot be achieved. Thus R. Tarfon says:

> It is not thy duty to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it.[39] [redacted]

The aim of study is not completeness, yet learning is to be pursued with steady devotion. But it does not simply accumulate in a static way; it does not stand still in the mind. Unless it is added to, it is diminished. This dynamic property is expressed succinctly by Hillel, who says: "He who does not increase his knowledge, decreases it."[40] [redacted] Here is an ancient statement of the principle of growth in education.

With respect to specific methods of teaching, I will only mention the importance of memory in all traditional education, a particularly valued skill in the age before printing. Literary mnemonics were well developed in Jewish practice. The Talmud tells us that (according to R. Hisda,) "The Torah cannot be retained except through signs."[41] [redacted] The oldest reference to alphabet metaphors, detailed, apparently designed for children, [redacted], appears in B. Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, [redacted] where homiletic interpretation is given to the names of the Hebrew letters, based on their graphic appearance.[42] The shape is associated with something known to the child, who is then to associate it with the name of the letter. (The notion of phonics, which (a letter) associates directly (with) its sound, [redacted] is different.)

> The rabbis told R. Joshua b. Levi: Children have come to the Beth Hamidrash and said things the like of which was not said even in the days of

> Joshua b. Nun: Alef beys means learn wisdom. Gimel daled, show kindness to the poor. Why is the foot of the giml stretched toward the daled? Because it is fitting for the benevolent to run after the poor. And why is the roof of the daled stretched toward the giml? Because he must make himself available to him. And why is the face of the daled turned away from the giml? Because he (giml) must give him (daled) help in secret, lest he shame him.

4) The Content of Learning

The content of learning is the Torah. But the Torah is not the text. It comprises two parts, Torah she-bikhtav and Torah she-beal peh, the written and the oral Torah. It is therefore not limited by the fixed boundaries of the printed word, but is infinite. One pursues the truth of the Torah through the printed word, to begin with, but the oral interpretations are an indispensable vehicle. Moreover, they continue to grow and develop in an endless dialectic.

There is thus no final human authority that can claim complete mastery of the Torah. The evolving Torah itself is independent of any person or historical group of persons; it is autonomous in this sense. A striking Talmudic story illustrates this point in showing that even Moses, our teacher, was no better than any of us in this regard:

> R. Judah said, in the name of Rab: When Moses rose to the heavens, he found the Holy One, Blessed Be He, occupied in tying crowns to the letters (of the Torah). He said to him:

> Lord of the Universe, who requires you to do this (i.e. to add to your written word of the Torah)? He replied: There is a man who will be born several generations from now and his name will be Akiba the son of Joseph; he will derive from each jot of the Torah's letters mountains of halachic conclusions. Said Moses: Lord of the Universe, show him to me. Replied He: Turn around. Moses then went and sat in the eighth row (of Akiba's lecture hall), but could not understand what was being discussed. He felt faint, disheartened. When the discussion reached a certain point, R. Akiba's students asked him: Rabbi, whence do you derive this? And R. Akiba replied: This is (part of) the halacha given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Moses then felt better. He returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and said: Lord of the Universe, you have a man like that, yet you gave the Torah through me? To which came the reply: Be silent! This was my design. [redacted] 44

Moses, who brought us the text of the written Torah, did not understand the depth of the interpretations and inferences built upon it. In some sense all these inferences are embodied in the text, but they are not accessible to anyone at any given time no matter how wise and learned. Only the historical process of continuing dialectic discussion can draw them forth. Such discussion is, in effect, an instrument of perception, revealing what is hidden in the text, in a piecemeal and continuing process in historical time.

If the Torah transcends all human authorities, it is autonomous in a further sense, even from the Almighty. Already in the story just quoted, we saw the Holy One, Blessed Be He, occupying Himself with the Torah, His own creation. Now in the following story, we see the boldest stroke of the Talmudic Masters. For they here tell us that the very process of interpretation which forms an integral part of the Torah is independent of the Divine authority itself -- since the written Torah explicitly construes such interpretation as a human process.

> On that day, R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument but they did not accept them. Said he to them. If the halacha agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it. Thereupon the carob tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place -- others affirm four hundred cubits. No proof can be brought from a carob tree, they retorted.
>
> Again, he said to them: If the halacha agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it. Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. No proof can be brought from a stream of water, they rejoined. Again he urged: If the halacha agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse (academy) prove it. Whereupon the walls inclined to fall.
>
> But R. Joshua rebuked them (the walls) saying, When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have you to interfere? Hence they did not fall, out of respect for

R. Joshua, but they did not become straight again out of respect for R. Eliezer, and they are still standing thus inclined.

Again, he said to them, if the halacha agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven. Whereupon a Heavenly voice cried out: Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halacha agrees with him. But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: It (the Torah) is not in heaven. (Deut. 30:12)

What did he mean by this? --

Said R. Jeremiah: That Torah had already been given at Mt. Sinai. We pay no attention to a Heavenly voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mt. Sinai: After the majority must one incline (Ex. 23:2)

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed Be He, do then ? He laughed with joy, he replied, saying, My sons have defeated Me, my sons have defeated Me. 45

Not even the Lord has the final word in matters of interpretation of the Word. The world of sacred learning, the Torah, is accessible not through magic, not through visions, not through formulas, not through authority whether human or Divine, but only through the patient and infinite process of human study and learning. No greater tribute to education can be conceived. It is the tribute, I believe, which best symbolizes Judaism's philosophy of education.

Footnotes

* This paper was originally given as an adult education lecture at Temple Emanuel, Newton, in February 1984.

1. Julius B. Maller, "The Role of Education in Jewish History", in L. Finkelstein, ed. The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion (New York: Harper, 1949), Vol. II, p. 897.

2. Ibid.

3. Michael Higger, ed. The Treatises Derek Erez: Edited from manuscripts with an Introduction, Notes, Variants and Translation (Brooklyn, New York: Moinester Publishing Co., 1935), editor's introduction, p. 12.

4. Ibid., pp. 13-15.

5. Ibid., "Masseket Derek Erez", Ch. VII, p. 50.

6. Ibid., Ch. VI, p. 48.

7. Ibid., Ch. I, pp. 36-7.

8. Ibid., Ch. II, p. 40.

9. Ibid., Ch. I, p. 37.

10. Ibid., Ch. I, p. 34, The Hebrew, from Masseket Derek Eretz, Ch. I : 11 is found on p. 63 of the Hebrew section in Higger, Ibid.

11. Taanit, 8a

12. Abot 2, 5.

13. Erubin, 54b

14. Abot, 4, 20 (Translation of J. H. Hertz, Sayings of the Fathers (New York: Behrman House, 1945), p. 81.(Hertz's numbering of verses differs from the traditional numbering I have followed here.) I have used Hertz's translations wherever I refer to them in footnotes.

15. Ibid., (Hertz, Op. cit., 81)

16. Ibid., 4, 1 (Hertz, Op. cit., 65-6)

17. Abot, 6, 3 (Hertz, 109)

18. Ibid., 4, 12 (Hertz, 75)

19. Ibid., 4, 13 (Hertz, 75)

20. Rosh Hashanah, 23a

21. Kiddushin, 29a

22. Abot, 3, 17

23. Abot, 2, 5 (Hertz, 33)

24. Kiddushin, 40b

25. Abot, 3, 9 (Hertz, 55)

26. Abot, 3, 17 (Hertz, 63, 65)

27. Ibid., 5, 12 (Hertz, 95)

28. Ibid., 5, 15 (Hertz, 97)

29. Ibid., 2, 8 (Hertz, 37)

30. Horaiyot, 14a. (See also L. I. Newman, The Talmudic Anthology (New York: Behrman, 468)

31. Berachot, 63b

32. Abot, 4, 14 (Hertz, 77)

33. Ibid., 1, 4 (Hertz, 16)

34. Ibid., 4, 20 (Hertz, 79, 81)

35. Abot 5, 20 (Hertz 101, 103)

36. Ibid., 1, 15 (Hertz, 25)

37. Ibid., 2, 4 (Hertz, 33)

38. Ibid., 4, 10 (Hertz, 73)

39. Ibid., 2, 16 (Hertz, 45)

40. Ibid., 1, 13 (Hertz, 23)

41. Erubin, 54b. See Diane Roskies, "Alphabet Instruction in the East European Heder: Some Comparative and Historical Notes", Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science, XVII (1978), 21-53, esp. p. 29.

43. Shabbat, 104a. [See also Roskies, [redacted] Ibid., 29.

44. [redacted] Menahot, 29b

45. [redacted] Baba Metzia, 59b

42. Roskies, Ibid., 29, 32. This whole article by Roskies is of considerable interest.

Israel Scheffler
[redacted]

Jewish Education: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities *

I. Purposes

I begin with a caution: If we turn to Jewish education worldwide with the categories of public national systems in mind, we are sure to be misled. Unlike schooling under these systems, Jewish education is not compulsory, it does not derive from national citizenship nor connect with university or professional education. It does not aim to introduce students to the arts and sciences nor does it evaluate them in terms of academic achievement. It provides no vocational, career, or artistic training, nor does it function to select students for adult roles in society. It is, further, neither parallel to, nor a substitute for, what may be regarded as general education or universal culture; it no more frees one from the need for such culture than does an Argentinian or Alaskan or Norwegian education.

The purposes of Jewish education differ wholly from those of public education. These purposes are neither civic, nor individualistic, nor utilitarian. Viewed in relation to the pupil, they are: to initiate the Jewish child into the culture, history, and spiritual heritage of the Jewish people, to help the child to learn and face the truth about Jewish history, identity, and existence, to enhance his or her dignity as a Jewish person, and to enable the child to accept, and to be creative in, the Jewish dimension of its life.

Viewed rather in its relation to the Jewish people, the purposes of Jewish education are: to promote its survival and welfare, to interpret and communicate authentic Jewish experience, to sustain and defend Jewish honor and loyalties, to create living links with the Jewish past, preserving and

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extending its heritage for future generations. Ideally, Jewish education should be a natural reflection of the inner dignity of the Jewish people, and of its ethical, spiritual and cultural resources, as well as a response to current social and intellectual realities. This means: it should not be merely defensive, or apologetic, or imitative, or archaic, or nostalgic for a past that is no more. Rather, from its own position of inner strength and historical self-awareness, it should have the courage not only to reevaluate its directions, but also to adapt whatever is worthwhile in the environment to its own purposes, thus promoting the creative continuity of its civilization.

II. Problems

The problems facing Jewish education in modern industrial society stand out sharply by contrast with the pre-modern period, for which education in the Jewish school, home, and community was one continuous entity, embodied concretely in all spheres of life. Insofar as formal Jewish schooling or study was differentiated in the earlier period it was accorded the highest religious and metaphysical status, regarded as an intrinsic value, a form of worship, but also a practical guide in all spheres of life. Scattered in their diverse and fragile communities, Jews assuredly had no control over the world, but they had the word, and the word gave them access to the highest heavens, to which their religious life was dedicated. What sociologists have remarked as the peculiar mixture of Jewish intellectuality, otherworldliness, and steadfastness in adversity is perhaps illuminated by the special role of classical Jewish education.

The Jew lived a precarious existence, but the philosophical framework of Jew and non-Jew alike was largely the same. The world revealed by faith was created by a personal and omnipotent God, who put mankind at the center

of his creation, endowed human beings with free will and made absolute moral and devotional demands of them. Human actions were freighted with significance, supervised by Providence, consequential in the last degree. History, an interplay of God's will and men's wills, was to be read partly as natural, partly as miraculous, but in any case as inviting interpretation by personal, moral, and religious categories, such as loyalty, gratitude, reciprocity, covenant, punishment and reward, reverence, sin, stubbornness, and repentance. The holiness of The Jewish Scriptures, central to this philosophical world-view, was virtually unquestioned. Although Jews suffered for refusing to accept Christianity or Islam as the higher fulfillment of these Scriptures, the Scriptures themselves were regarded by all as sacred. Jewish education was thus based on [redacted] systematic beliefs, of which the basic philosophical features were recognized and shared by all. Such education offered a genuine reflection of historical Jewish existence, offering an authentic response to that existence in the [redacted] doctrines and practices of Judaism.

Now every feature of the pre-modern context has been destroyed or rendered problematic in the modern period. The emancipation and entry of the Jew into the mainstream of Western life broke the tightly knit harmony of home, school and community. The general breakdown of the medieval world view shattered the inherited conception of nature and history shared by Jew and non-Jew alike, undermined traditional attitudes to their religious Scriptures, and destroyed the uniform traditional response to Jewish existence which constituted the basis of education in the past.

The Jewish genius for religious creativity, already severely threatened by these changes, has now, further, been profoundly shocked by the incalculable trauma of the Holocaust. Jewish predictions for intellectual and otherworldly thought have, concomitantly, been secularized, largely diverted into scientific and academic channels--thus reinforcing [redacted] universalistic ideologies corrosive of Jewish loyalties.

The momentum of the technological society meanwhile proceeds apace, most rapidly in the U.S. Mobility destroys communities and dissolves family bonds. Individualism and voluntarism erode the base of religious, and specifically Jewish, values. The pervasive commercialism, the ever more distracting media, the consumerism, the vulgarity, the sheer volume of competing activities and communications salient in contemporary life, all constitute obstacles to a vital Jewish education. Unlike their educational forebears, Jewish educators of today cannot rely on a nearly universal philosophical consensus undergirding religious faith, nor on the support of a [redacted] devout Jewish home, nor on an authoritative Jewish community and--unlike their public counterparts--they cannot call on political and civic incentives for education, or on those of self-interest or career advancement. It is commonly said that education is a reflection of its society. Contemporary Jewish education has the task of creating the very society of which it should be the reflection.

There is no use bemoaning these facts, or looking back fondly to the memory of circumstances more favorable to Jewish education. If such education is to succeed, it must do so here and now. If it fails, fond memories will afford no consolation. To grasp the possibility of success,

educators need to realize the magnitude of the problem and then to mobilize their efforts to address it. Concerted action on several fronts is needed. I shall here offer some suggestions, divided into two rough categories: organizational and philosophical.

III. Possibilities

A. Organizational suggestions

The problems of Jewish education, arising from a shared commitment to Jewish survival, nevertheless vary qualitatively with the communities into which the Jewish people is divided. Seen in the worldwide perspective of its overriding purpose, Jewish education must, however, take as a primary task to strengthen the bonds among these communities, to build and reinforce lines of communication among them, developing morale, understanding, and mutual support. The problems they severally face differ in various respects, and they must find correspondingly varying ways of meeting them. But in shared purpose and fate, each has a stake in the success of the rest. Each must therefore foster an awareness of all, seeing itself not merely in local and current terms, but as part of a continuous people, stewards-in-common of a precious heritage of culture.

Among the several Jewish communities, the one in Israel occupies a central place, as the only one in which the historic language of Jews lives, in which the self-consciousness of Jews as a people is public and explicit, in which the possibility of continuous cultural development is maximal. The love of the land and the deep bond between diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities are basic to Jewish educational goals and, consequently, so also is a profound concern for the welfare of the Jewish community of Israel.

Yet Jewishness is not to be confused with Israelism. Israeli citizens include non-Jews, while most Jews are not Israeli citizens. Nor can Jewish education be reduced to pro-Israelism. It must take into account the rich content of Jewish experience throughout the centuries, reckon with the diverse characteristics and needs of diaspora Jewish communities, and take as its fundamental goal the strengthening of informed Jewish loyalties in diverse spheres of life. It must educate each Jewish community to take a role in the worldwide deliberations of the Jewish people, for each such community has a role to play and a point of view to represent.

Jewish education, in this conception, is inevitably pluralistic. Within the framework of its common purposes, it is to be realized in different ways, every such realization based on an authentic relation to the Jewish past and an effort to make some portion of that past usable in the present. But it is bound, at the same time, to respect the differing interpretations of Jewish life which strive, in their various ways, to preserve and promote Jewish values.

Jewish education ought, in every one of its realizations, to promote an inclusive sense of time--an awareness of, and affiliation with, the history of the Jewish people; a comprehensive sense of space--an awareness of, and association with, the Jewish communities scattered across the globe, and a cultivated sense of self--a knowledge of the Hebrew language and other languages of Jews, and an acquaintance with the treasured achievements and literatures of Jewish thought, feeling, striving, and expression throughout the ages.

Some suggestions of a curricular and institutional sort are these:

Finally, institutions for the worldwide coordination of educational efforts should be developed. These would facilitate research, comparative studies and evaluations, preparation and dissemination of educational materials, and exchanges amongst Jewish educators in the various communities. Centers for research, development, training, field studies and planning should be formed.

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A rethinking of real educational time should be undertaken, both as regards the annual calendar, to emphasize learning time outside traditional school hours, and as regards the life span, to emphasize adult education, family education, education in university settings, and projects linking older and younger generations.

Analogously, a rethinking of real educational space is needed, to emphasize local learning sites outside the traditional school, e.g. Judaica collections in university libraries, Jewish institutions such as hospitals, museums, newspapers, presses, bookstores, homes for the aged, community councils, studios, educational and service bureaus; as well, exchanges and visits to Jewish communities elsewhere.

In addition, a rethinking of the educational development of Jewish selfhood is needed, to prepare and revise learning materials for children of various ages, and for adults, emphasizing not only history, language and literature, but also experiences and practices, arts and music, and the analysis of social problems confronting contemporary Jewish communities.

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B. Philosophical suggestions

The problems of Jewish education are not, in any event, primarily organizational. Nor are they wholly soluble by exhortation, inspiration, funding, or research. All of these have their place but none can substitute for a philosophical rethinking of the bases of Jewish life in our times.

By philosophy, I intend nothing technical or abstruse, but an engagement with such basic questions as: How can the purposes of Jewish education best be realized in the present? What is the justification for such education? What is our positive vision of an ideal Jewish life in this century? What ought we to expect of Jewish youth under the actual constraints of their life conditions? How help them, and ourselves, to an authentic appreciation of Jewish values? How enable them to go beyond us to develop the latent intimations of Jewish traditions and insights? How shall we introduce them to Jewish materials so that these materials may germinate and grow in their minds and hearts and flourish in the world they will inhabit rather than the worlds we can remember? A reflective answer to this last question requires a fresh perception of the materials themselves, without which they will remain educationally inert. I offer no complete answers here, but only some suggestions on two basic sorts of materials: Jewish texts and religious rituals.

(1) Texts

Jewish education is said to be traditionally text-centered. The attribution is misleading, for the study of sacred texts in classical Judaism was not self-sufficient, but supported by constant educative influences flowing from the life of the family and the practice of the community. Nevertheless, these texts and their interpretive literatures did constitute the basic focus of formal study.

This traditional role of textual materials, incidentally, offers another, and a positive, dissimilarity with general public schooling. For where such schooling often has to rely on scattered and artificial items of the "See Spot run" variety in early education, Jewish education can draw on the rich and momentous texts that have shaped both Jewish and non-Jewish consciousness throughout the centuries.

But magnificent as these texts may be, they must ~~seem~~ be seen, from an educational point of view, as (providing only) raw materials for learning. In themselves lifeless, they cannot speak to our pupils until these pupils have learned to hear, come within range, acquired the needed meanings, and been prompted to ask the appropriate questions. If these texts seem so obviously meaningful to us--that is, to adult educators--it is only because we have already gone through the processes of learning to hear them. The obviousness of their meaning is an artifact of <u>our</u> early training, and cannot be generated in our youth by mere exposure. They need themselves to learn how to hear the message, to grasp it in a way that will be effective for them, whether or not it was our way in the past.

A reflective or philosophical approach to this task requires us to rethink the texts ourselves; unlearning our habitual perceptions, we need to look at the texts again with fresh eyes and from new angles. The teaching of the young ought to be an occasion for the re-teaching of ourselves (their teachers). Such re-teaching is a matter, not merely of recalling our own half-remembered learnings, or of relating the text to past context and commentary, but also it is an occasion for exploration and discovery--for finding those new meanings in the text which can only be revealed by the serious effort to

make it available in the present. A philosophical approach to teaching the text should, in short, renew the text itself, as well as teach both teacher and pupil.

(2) Religious rituals

Religion is a closed book to large numbers of Jews and non-Jews alike. To open this book, at least partially, through reinterpretation in contemporary intellectual terms is a philosophical task of the first importance. For Jewish education it is crucial in view of the intimate historical dependence of Jewish civilization upon its religious core. I do not pretend to do more here than make some suggestions on the topic of ritual as educational matter.

To begin with, it is worth emphasizing the fact that religion has a history, despite common denials by religionists themselves. Every doctrine and rite preserves echoes of earlier beliefs no longer accepted reflectively today. The continuity of religion is in substantial part a product of reinterpretation, acknowledged or not. Thus the effort at contemporary reinterpretation has ample precedent.

Attitudes toward ritual have clearly undergone enormous changes, the details of which can here be left to the scholars. But a brief sketch, following Yehezkel Kaufmann, will make the point. Primitive pre-Biblical culture conceived of ritual as magic, a technique for manipulating nature. The rites, properly performed, guaranteed the fertility of flocks and fields, protection against drought, freedom from sickness, victory in war, control over one's enemies, success in enterprise. This conception did not give the gods or spirits a privileged position. These spirits themselves used

ritual and magic to gain their ends, and were in turn subject to manipulation by ritual and magic employed by other spirits and by man. These characteristics are amply exhibited in pagan mythology and stories of the gods.

A more humanistic but still primitive view which overlay the magical conception was that of ritual as propitiation of the gods or spirits in control of some natural resources. Pleasing the god in control of rainfall would, it was hoped, guarantee rainfall--not automatically--but through the mediation of the will of the god, who could be dealt with on the basis of pleas and gifts, but not coerced through a mechanical technique. This was the world view of polytheisim--nature as a set of different regions or forces, each under the rule of an independent local will that could be bargained with, as one would bargain with a human being.

Biblical religion wrought a radical transformation in these beliefs, propounding the doctrine of a transcendent, single god, who was not part of nature but who stood wholly beyond it, having created it and all that it contains, and whose will was the source of absolute moral commands laid upon human beings generally and the children of Israel in particular. Such a being had no need of magical devices to attain his goals. He could not be manipulated by the techniques of men nor bargained with like a local landowner or petty politician. The Bible contains the record of this transformation in its rejection of all mythology and its strong polemic against magic, idolatry, and divination.

NO ¶ → Yet elements of earlier beliefs as to the magical efficacy of rites can be still discerned in the Pentateuch. ¶ Prophetic attitudes toward the rites as conditional and subordinate to the moral commands prevailed in later,

Rabbinic Judaism. What, however, was the purpose of rites for which no rational meaning could be found? Kaufmann says "The ultimate sanction of the rite became the divine will. Judaism thus created a noble symbol for its basic idea that everything is a divine command; fulfilling the command is an acknowledgement of the supremacy of God's will. A cult of commands evolved; the system of commands sanctified all of life to the service of the One. To laws for which no rational explanation could be found, the Rabbis applied the general principle, 'The commandments were given only for the purpose of purifying human beings' (Gen. Rabbah 44.1)." 2

רב אמר לא נתנו המצות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות.
וכי מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או
מי ששוחט מן העורף. הוי לא נתנו המצות אלא לצרף
בהם את הבריות.

This humanistic attitude of the Rabbis views the rites as, in effect, educative through their symbolic value. Ritual "purifies human beings" not through magical force or propitiatory effect but through its reflexive symbolic impact which helps to relate its participants to higher values and more exalted purposes.

This historical attitude is available to reinterpretive efforts today, and can indeed be considerably extended. A ritual system can be viewed as an elaborate symbolic apparatus, a complex language which profoundly alters the perceptions and sensibilities of those who learn to interpret and apply it in living practice. ~~use it to express their thoughts and feelings.~~ I mention here three, out of several, cardinal symbolic functions performed by ritual: denotation, expression, and reenactment. 3

a) Denotation: Jewish rites ~~Rites~~ pick out or portray various events and aspects of life associated with Jewish history and with the distinctive values distilled in that history. By repeated occurrence though the year and at major junctures of personal life, rites bring participants into continual contact with these values. Judaism ~~is~~ as a historical religion ~~and its~~ has rites that are largely commemorative. The seasonal rhythms of agricultural rites were historicized as well and thus reflected in ritual after the land was lost. Thus the ritual calendar became the denotative cement holding the whole system together. Beyond the day to day practical tasks of their lives, Jews had in the scheme of ritual observance referential access to a dramatic world of history and purpose in which they found meaning.

b) Expression: Ritual actions have a second symbolic function, beyond denotation, i.e. expression. Just as a painting may express joy or nostalgia while denoting a landscape, a rite may express a feeling or attitude while portraying a historical event. Jewish rituals thus indeed express a whole range of feelings and moods, fear and deliverance (Purim), the bitterness of slavery and the joy of redemption (Passover), contrition and exultation (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), wonder, trust and peace (Sabbath). The rites carrying these expressive values do not uniformly evoke the respective emotions in performance. Yet, the repeated exposure to such symbolized values shapes the character and sensibility of its participants, over time.

c) Reenactment: ~~Repression~~ Ritual performances allude indirectly to previous performances. Each new Seder calls to mind ~~Seders~~ Sedarim past, i.e. reenacts them while at the same time portraying the exodus, and expressing the joy of liberation from

bondage. The repetition of rites thus serves another purpose beyond the shaping of individual perceptions--that is, the development of tradition--the sense, with each repetition of a rite, that it is a repetition. And tradition further structures time; beyond the commemoration of historical events, and beyond the ordering of rhythms of the calendar year, tradition offers a sense of stability in a world of change and danger, a rootedness in time. All participants are, further, linked by the same ritual to one another, thus sharing a linkage in space as well, the sense of historical community bound to one another in the present, wherever they may be. "More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews." (It is understandable that the yearning of Soviet Jews for linkage with their brethren should have found expression in rediscovery of the joyful celebration of Simhath Torah.)

The symbol system of Jewish ritual can, I suggest, be treated in these terms in contemporary education. This system is not a piece of magic, superstition, rational theory, cosmic technology or outmoded theology. It constitutes a language which organizes a world, structuring time and space, orienting us in history, binding us in community, and sensitizing us to those features of life in which our forebears have found the highest value and deepest meanings--freedom, responsibility, sincerity, humility, care, loyalty, righteousness, compassion. The specific interpretations given to this symbolic system have changed throughout our history more frequently than the system itself. It is the system itself we need, however to treat seriously again, recovering it as a potent source for Jewish education.

* This paper was originally given at a Commencement of the Jerusalem Fellows, in June, 1985.

4. Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel [translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg], (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), esp. pp. 53-59, 101-103.

7. Ibid., p. 102.

8. Much of what follows derives from my studies of symbolic aspects of ritual, included in my Inquiries: Philosophical Studies of Language, Science, and Learning (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1986) Part I, Chs. 6, 7, 8.