

Jay LeVine
jaylev@gmail.com
December 19, 2013
CTF

*The Greatest Untapped Resource of the Jewish World is the Gifts of Jews:
The Jewish Generativity Paradigm*

You matter to the extent that you are different. This is the countercultural message that drives minority education. It is also grounded in Jewish tradition:

“One stamps out many coins with one die, and they are all alike, but the King, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be God, stamped each person with the seal of Adam, and not one of them is like his or her fellow. Therefore each and every one is obliged to say, ‘For my sake the world was created’”. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)¹

Not just each culture, but each individual is unique, something new in the world. And not only that, but as a result of an individual’s uniqueness, he or she is even required to claim that the world exists for them. This radical statement can be understood as a hyperbolic way of emphasizing just how important one person can be in relation to a whole system. Specifically, it asserts that every person makes an impact, and because every person is different, the impact each one makes is unique and irreplaceable.

This is a powerful and inspiring message, but it is not at all clear what the educational implications could or should be. In fact, it could lead to two different competing agendas. These agendas fall into two broad paradigms, one in which peoplehood is paramount, and one in which personal meaning or choice takes priority. Neither paradigm adequately responds to the voice in Jewish tradition calling for unique expression within a collective context.

The first paradigm, the peoplehood paradigm, and can be associated with a number of other negative descriptors, such as essentialist or survivalist, and consists of a dominant concern with continuity of Jewry (the people themselves as Jews) or Jewishness (an articulation of the

¹ Translation from On1Foot, <http://www.on1foot.org/text/mishna-sanhedrin-45>. Accessed 11-24-13.

ideal Jew). Regardless of the degree to which adherents of this paradigm emphasize Jewish content or connection, what those who see Jewish education through this lens share is an insistence that each Jew counts as a member of the collective. Each Jew has obligations to meet a standard or maintain the tribe. For example, think of the rabbi who frets that certain congregants rarely show up to Shabbat services – if the rabbi thinks the Shabbat attendance is a strong marker of what makes or keeps a Jew Jewish, or if there is an insistence that the liturgy as is needs to be learned by congregants in order for them to participate. In this way, the peoplehood paradigm can be at risk for being marked by both a quest for quantity and imposed determinations of what count as quality.

The second paradigm, the personal paradigm, is reflected in the actions and often in the ideologies of the liberal Jewish movements. Individual choice, even if set in the context of communal commitment, defines the role of a Jew with regard to Jewish tradition. As such, personal meaning trumps obligation in an increasing number of arenas.² Each person counts here, not mainly as members of a collective, but on their own terms and in their own eclectic appropriation of Jewish ideas and actions. An example of the personal paradigm might be a junior rabbi at a large congregation who spends part of his time at bars trying to engage young adults in Judaism. What these young adults get from Judaism is on their terms, to the degree they wish to accept it, and they are amenable to community only to the extent that the community matches their interests.

Of course, in actuality there is often overlap between these two ways of viewing what it means to count as a Jewish individual. Yet, whether in its pure form or in some hybrid fashion, neither paradigm unlocks the full potential of Jewish education for building the Jewish future.

² Woocher, Jonathan, "Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century," *Journal of Jewish Education*, 78 (2012), p. 198.

What these paradigms are missing has been captured most powerfully by Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, a social entrepreneur and author dedicated to envisioning how Jewish communities and leaders can best function in the 21st century. Schwarz claims that the greatest untapped resource of the Jewish world is the gifts of Jews.³ In other words, the two paradigms are failing to account fully for what Jews can give to Judaism. The peoplehood paradigm focuses on belonging to the collective and to what degree Jews deviate or conform to a certain ideal or standard. The personal paradigm focuses on relevance; in other words where the peoplehood paradigm insists Jews belong to Judaism, the personal paradigm asserts that Judaism belongs to the Jews, who can use it as they choose to or not. But neither paradigm focuses on *unique contributions*, on who gives what to Judaism. Neither paradigm sets Jews and Judaism as partners in a creative yet grounded process. Giving to Judaism, Schwarz would argue, actually has less to do with money, nor numbers of members, but the unique and personal offering of an individual through which the collective body of traditions and all who are touched by it are enriched.

This third perspective I call the “Jewish generativity paradigm.” Both individuals and communities are strengthened in real partnership through this paradigm. Most adults desire to contribute to the world, particularly at the stage of development that psychologist Erik Erikson described as the struggle between generativity and stagnation.⁴ Generativity is the process of giving, of contributing something new, of participating in the shaping of a future community. When an adult’s ability to contribute to something greater is curbed, the result is personal stagnation. And this is true on a broader scale too: when the organized Jewish world fails to encourage generativity, the result is nothing less than communal stagnation. Increasing the ability of adults to contribute their unique gifts ensures both individual and communal vibrance,

³ Personal correspondence, November 9, 2013.

⁴ Schuster, Diane Tickton, *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice* (New York: UAH Press, 2003), 96.

as individuals find meaning and fulfillment and communities gain new beauty, depth, and insight that might have been channeled elsewhere or left unrealized.

Psychologist and specialist in adult Jewish education, Diane Tickton Schuster, offers a solution. She provides a glimpse of what a generative learner entails. Drawing on the work of Mary Belenky, she describes “constructed knowers,” or what she calls the highest level of educated Jews, as follows:

“...Jewish constructed knowers...take intellectual risks and bring their insights and experiences to the **creation of new knowledge**; at the same time, they yearn to integrate Jewish ideas into their own lives and way of thinking...The more these learners engage in **constructing Jewish knowledge** for themselves, the more they are willing to share their learning and insights with others.”⁵ (emphasis added)

Jewish adults, particularly those not serving as Jewish professionals, have a wealth of experiences that would add immensely to Jewish study and ritual, yet the Jewish professional world has not dedicated enough energy to nurturing Jewish generativity. Instead, adult education has emphasized skills and knowledge acquisition as a means to participating in Jewish life or it has emphasized the personal meaning and relevance of Jewish content which is the starting point but not the ultimate goal of Jewish education in the generativity paradigm.

Happily, models of Jewish generativity, and Jewish generativity done well, do exist. For one inspiring example, we can turn to Rabbi Michael Paley, a scholar-in-residence at UJA-Federation of New York. Here is how Paley describes what motivates his work as an innovative Jewish adult educator:

“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

⁵ *ibid.*, 88.

Batra...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.”⁶

Every Jew, professional or not, has a talent that could revolutionize Judaism for the better, if Jewish communities created a system that facilitates collaborative encounters with Jewish tradition.

Another intriguing model of fostering Jewish generativity is happening in Israel. Alma, a secular beit midrash in Tel Aviv, has created an admittedly selective program for graduates of arts and humanities programs, in which “[t]he goal is that they become leading change agents in the public sphere, breathing Hebrew culture into their work.”⁷ Alma’s vision is to use Jewish learning to create a cultural renaissance, with political overtones due to the fusion of Judaism and politics in Israel. What Alma has accomplished is a targeted form of generativity-driven adult education, where students immerse themselves in Jewish texts with the intent not only to learn from them but also to create new interpretations of them via artistic endeavors.

The growth and enrichment of Judaism should not be limited to professional Jews, nor be an opportunity afforded solely to those lucky enough to be qualified for selective programs or to live near innovative institutions. All Jews, every unique coin minted, matter because they are different. Drawing out those differences in the service of generating deeper and broader perspectives of Judaism is the pressing task for Jewish leadership entering what some are even beginning to call a “post-rabbinic” era.⁸ As centralized leadership wanes, and as personalized approaches spin ever farther away from a shared set of principles and practices, Jewish generativity can

⁶ Paley, Michael, “Jewish Education as a Tool of Engagement,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 85, no. 1(2010): 46.

⁷ <http://alma.org.il/content.asp?lang=en&pageid=8>. Accessed 11-24-13.

⁸ <http://thenotoriousrav.blogspot.com/2011/06/post-denominational-post-modern-post.html>. Accessed 1-30-14.

provide the balance between individual and community, past and future, continuity and exploration, that must characterize a vibrant, thriving Judaism in the new era.