

Cosmopolitan Jewish Education for the Jews Next Dor

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The American Jewish education enterprise must shift its thrust from cultivating good citizens of the Jewish community, ostensibly prepared to sustain its growth and perpetuation, to cultivating good Jewish citizens of the world, who are able to contribute to the progress and enhancement of our changing cosmos more generally.

by Benjamin M. Jacobs

In the 21st century, Judaism, Jewish life, Jewish peoplehood, the Jewish state, Jewish identity – indeed, almost all facets of the Jewish experience – are in a postmodern, post-denominational, post-ethnic, post-Zionist, post-diaspora, or what we may simply call a “post-everything” age.[1] In the post-everything age, Jewish identity is fluid, contested, and complicated, while the outlook for Jewish continuity is unsettled at best. Longstanding conceptions of what it means to be Jewish, let alone a “good Jew,” are being challenged by new emphases on individualism alongside a declining sense of collective identity.

As a result, most young Jews in the post-everything age no longer feel defined or constrained by the rubric of Jewish religious/ethnic/national identity. Instead, they live with diverse identities that are constantly being constructed and reconstructed in an ever-changing and complex, but nonetheless increasingly interconnected, world. New types of post-everything cultural, ethnic, civic, and/or religious Jewish affiliation are becoming more appealing to a rising generation of American Jews who no longer regard establishment ideas, institutions, and concerns relevant. (This idea was explored in the aptly named study by Greenberg and Berkold, *Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam: Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*).

The challenge of Jewish education in the post-everything age is to find something meaningful for the large number of rank-and-file (i.e., non-Orthodox, but also non-secular), coming-of-age, so-called Generation Next, or *Next Dor* American Jewish youth, who may in fact participate in Jewish education activities and seek positive connections to Jewish life but are not especially motivated by what they actually experience in Jewish schools.

For the Jews next *dor*, I propose a program of *cosmopolitan Jewish education* in tune with the post-everything zeitgeist. The American Jewish education enterprise must shift its thrust from cultivating good citizens of the Jewish community, ostensibly prepared to sustain its growth and perpetuation (“identity and continuity”), to cultivating good Jewish citizens of the world, who are able to contribute to the progress and enhancement of our changing cosmos more generally.

Jewish education for rooted cosmopolitanism, whereby young Jews are “attached to a home of one’s own, with its own cultural particularities, but [also take] pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people,” in the vision of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, is what is now needed. Being cosmopolitan – often understood as being a “citizen of the world” – means embracing a broader horizon of outlook, a broader horizon of concern and a broader horizon of people beyond one’s immediate context.

It also means remaining rooted in one’s local/family/community culture, being mindful of heritage, and retaining moral allegiance to one’s own customs and habits, for they may provide sensibilities that can help one respond to the complexities of contemporary life. In the words of philosopher David T. Hansen of Teachers College, Columbia, educational cosmopolitanism “aspires to be universal without being universalistic, to be local without being parochial, to be culturally conservationist and tradition-respecting without being traditionalistic, to be open to learning lessons for life from other traditions and inheritances, and to esteem the individual human being without becoming individualistic.”

Cosmopolitan education calls for students to be initiated into their local culture, traditions and way of life, so that they have a backdrop against which to compare people of differing backgrounds, values and practices. From there, the educational program would endorse liberal, deliberative and analytical stances toward those very same local traditions and inheritances, so as to develop in the young the capacity for critical detachment from what is familiar to them, in order to be at once reflective on their own cultural foundations and also receptive to understanding the cultural foundations of others. The critical detachment is not meant to dismantle one’s affection for or affiliation with the local community and its

traditions. It is only meant to enable students to see themselves as others might see them, warts and all, and to recognize the complex ways in which human experiences are interrelated across spatial, temporal, racial, ethnic, national, religious boundaries.

In the process, it might even persuade individuals to appreciate the contributions of their local culture to the cosmos, or enlighten them about ways they can bring about change from within in order to make the world better. Encouraging students to learn from other traditions as a means of clarifying their own ways of seeing the world also fosters cross-cultural understanding, an appreciation of shared fate, and a capacity to see the potentialities of building common ground for the sake of cultural creativity and social transformation the world over.

What might a program of cosmopolitan Jewish education look like, and by what means might it be effectuated? Cosmopolitan Jewish education begins with an intensive program of Jewish socialization, that is, the local socialization that is prerequisite to further edification, which we will call Yiddishkeit. While this might look quite similar to Jewish education programs of the past century, with their attention to tradition, history, and culture, now special emphasis would be placed on Jewish current events, communal concerns, social problems, cultural developments, politics, economic activities, demographics, social science, education, and other facets of 21st century Jewish life, so as to attune Jewish youth to the complexities of the contemporary Jewish world.

In contrast to conventional forms of Jewish education, in which contemporary concerns are often subordinated to matters of tradition, cosmopolitan Jewish education calls for backward planning, that is, starting with contemporary Jewish problems and exploring their historical and conceptual roots. In a similar vein, cosmopolitan Jewish education calls for multiple possible approaches to a problem rather than a monolithic response. For example, teaching the laws of kashrut by emphasizing their moral and ecological implications, in addition to their historical and religious significance, not only accounts for the question of relevance to today's students, but it also keeps attention on those components of local heritage that have direct links to the broader issues in the present world. In place of the passive learning that cultural transmission often entails, the inquiry learning required in this scheme would orient students toward habits of investigation and analysis.

In the next stage, which we will call Menschlichkeit, students would be encouraged to develop a healthy skepticism toward narrowly parochial Jewish concerns while still maintaining an appreciation for the importance of Jewish community, peoplehood and values in the continuity of Jewish life. Students would be exposed to the system of values that Jews classically have promoted among themselves and in relation to others, including humility, compassion, empathy, mindfulness, kinship, mutual responsibility, moral courage, justice, charity, and good deeds. They would consider the extent to which ideas, practices, and episodes in the Jewish past and present reflect the inviolability of these values or their transgression.

They would adopt an analytic stance toward Jewish ways of living, with the hope of engendering critical reflection on what being a part of the ethical Jewish community implies and how it might be perceived by others – for example, why folks like Jacob Schiff were good while folks like Bernard Madoff were bad, both for the world at large and for Jewish communal life in particular. The intended outcomes of this process are the cultivation of menschlichkeit: Jewish ethical integrity, and the ability to judge what is right and wrong in this world against a system of traditional Jewish values and ways of living.

The last stage of the Jewish cosmopolitan education program involves tikkun olam. Tikkun olam has long been elemental to the American Jewish education enterprise, and there is no shortage of resources to draw on for rationales and methods for doing tikkun olam in Jewish education settings. Abundant brick-and-mortar and cyberspace Jewish organizations, networks, initiatives and programs are now applying Jewish principles, personnel, and resources to critical matters on the global agenda such as poverty relief, workers' rights, health and welfare, environmentalism, civil rights, racial equality, and peace.

The aim here, above all, is for Jewish youth to develop positive dispositions toward understanding the backgrounds, yearnings, and needs of others, and to gain proclivities and skills that can be utilized toward active involvement in repairing the world. Bringing this about requires the introduction of uncommon curriculum content, such as multicultural and critical consciousness materials, as well as instructional methods, such as intergroup relations, into the traditionally Jewish education context. It also involves making abundant space for introducing the work of the innovative Jewish organizations and programs in the classroom, in order to encourage affiliation and participation.

Effectuating cosmopolitan Jewish education would require substantial investment of time and resources in program and

curriculum development, teacher preparation, network formation, technology, and more. It would entail a reconfiguration of how Jewish educational institutions are conceptualized and most importantly, would require buy-in. But the choice is to continue to bemoan the feared demise of the Jewish community while clinging to a defensive, survivalist Jewish education agenda, or to appeal to the forward-looking, cosmopolitan sensibilities of the rising generation and give them the tools necessary to be good Jewish citizens of the 21st century world.

[1] Adapted from Benjamin M. Jacobs, "Problems and Prospects of Jewish Education for Intelligent Citizenship in a Post-Everything World," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 7:1 (2013), 39-53.

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