

EDUCATION FOR FREEDOM: THE MISSION OF LAY LEADERSHIP IN THIS GENERATION

by Irving Greenberg

The association of Jews and intellectual literacy is a staple of cultural conventional wisdom. Christian scholars often speak admiringly of how Judaism turned learning into a form of religious service. Islam honors the centrality of study in Jewish tradition by recognizing Jews with the honorific title “People of the Book.” Almost any list of Jewish values drawn up today lists education, alongside family, as *the* fundamental value.

The Jewish connection to learning was not always so strong. An honest reading of the Bible suggests that in that period, the people Israel was a collection of mostly illiterate peasants/farmers who watched passively as priests brought their sacrifices and Levites offered prayer, service and music on their behalf. There was a cadre of elite scribes (mostly at the king’s court in the earlier biblical period; there were wider circles in additional places later on). But there is no record of school systems for the masses.

The centrality of education is the outcome of a great transformation of the Jewish people, primarily accomplished after the destruction of the Second Temple almost 2,000 years ago. After that catastrophe, it seemed obvious that the people could not live without a land, and the religion could not go on without a Temple. Most of the Jewish leadership bent every effort to recover sovereignty and rebuild the Temple. With the failure of those efforts, they and their exhausted followers were swallowed up in the maw of Greco-Roman civilization. Others gave up in the face of defeat and joined the victorious Hellenist culture or the increasingly independent and triumphant daughter religion of Christianity.

The Rabbis – an obscure and marginal class without great standing when the period of exile began – emerged as the leaders of Jewish history by carrying out an inner cultural/religious revolution. They shifted the central paradigm of the faith – the nature of the covenant – and developed institutions which made tradition and values the possession of every Jew. To the Rabbis, the destruction of the Temple represented not God’s failure (as the Romans claimed) or rejection of Israel (as the Christians declared), but a divine call to greater responsibility for the human partner in the covenant. God had self-limited, choosing not to defeat the Romans with miracles (as was done to the Egyptians in the Exodus) so that the people of Israel would step up to take a more active part in the religion. There would be no more prophets bringing direct instructions from God; instead, humans (led by the Rabbis) would have to use their minds and their judgment – including study of past revelation – to determine what God wanted of the people now.

The Rabbis understood that the masses would have to be equipped with knowledge sufficient to play a more informed, active role in the shifting partnership. Entering exile, without a homeland and a Jewish majority in the population, the people would have to internalize Jewish teaching and beliefs, if they were to maintain Jewish identity in the face of increased exposure to religious and cultural alternatives. Since every Jew was at risk, every Jew had to become a student of wisdom (Torah). In prayer, which replaced sacrifice, every member of the congregation had to

be enabled to participate. In the home, which replaced the sanctuary as the location of many rituals and liturgies, every layman had to become a priest/officiant. To do all this, every Jew had to become learned at some level. The Rabbis made the mitzvah of Talmud Torah (Torah Study) central to Jewish religious life (and obligatory daily for every male). In a Gentile environment, the community would need to go beyond mutual help and stress Jews' shared commitment and values so learning was essential for community building. "When all your children are learned of the Lord, then great will be the peace of your children" (Isaiah 54:13). Said the Rabbis: Read that verse: not [great will be the peace of] banayich [your children] but [great will be the peace of] bonayich [your builders (of community)].

The Rabbis went on to build networks of instruction for elementary students and of advanced Yeshivas/academies which became the forging anvil for leaders and values alike. Centuries later, a Rabbi projected the role model and the credit for this accomplishment back to Joshua ben Gamala, a High Priest in the decade before the Destruction. "The memory of that man, Joshua ben Gamala, is to be blessed; but for him, the Torah would have been forgotten by the people Israel. At first, if a child had a father, then his father taught him; if he had no father, he would learn no Torah...then they made an ordinance that teachers of children [from teenage years on] be established in Jerusalem...until Joshua ben Gamala came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should be entered into school at the age of six and seven..." (Babylonian Talmud Baba Bathra 21A)

Through the Rabbis, the study and teaching of Torah was democratized and broadened. Unlike their predecessors, i.e., the priests and governing classes, the Rabbis were not members of a dynastic aristocracy. Scholars came from every social background and class. The Torah cannot be bestowed on anyone by birth or privilege. In Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Yose said, "Give yourself over to the study of Torah, for it does not come to you by inheritance." (chapter 2, m. 17)

The Rabbis inserted important moments of study into synagogue services and developed a host of popularizing methods, including thrice-weekly reading and study of Torah Scripture sections, as well as vernacular teaching sermons. They insisted on scholarships and other assistance to the poor. "Be especially careful of the children of poverty, for out of them will come the Torah." (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 81A) By glorifying learning, by holding up the teacher as role model, by involving lay people in liturgical life (so that they were motivated to learn and equip themselves to participate) the Rabbis made study central to Judaism and turned the people of Israel into a learning community. No other people has survived the loss of homeland for so long. But through teaching and learning, the Rabbis made the Torah and the halachah (Jewish Way) into a portable sanctuary for the Jewish people until they returned to the land of Israel. Thus a moment of Jewish history that could have led to the dissolution of the people and of the faith was transformed, thanks to rabbinic leadership, into an occasion of renewal, educational breakthrough and religious renaissance.

Today we are living at another crossroad of Jewish destiny facing the alternative paths of educational transformation or identity disintegration. Only this time, the crossroads choice is

one that all humanity faces with us. This moment is the outcome of a human experiment in the United States of America, which has acted as an avant-garde of the world in creating an unprecedented level of freedom and lifestyle choices for all people.

This pervasive freedom is the result of the convergence of a multiplicity of forces, which add up together to (what I call,) the challenge of choice. Economic: The rise in the standard of living to the level of widespread affluence means that people feel they can afford to make multiple choices in career, dwelling places and commitments. (This is the psychological opposite of the children of the depression generation, who clung to jobs, locations, etc., for fear they would lose out altogether if they made any changes). Educational: Jews have one of the highest percentages in history of people pursuing higher education in college/university settings (80-90%). One of the primary effects of higher education is to stimulate self-expression, with greater emphasis on autonomy, choice and self-determination. Cultural: Throughout the culture, there is an emphasis on the end of the traditional or fixed roles. The genetically dictated is rejected in favor of the chosen identity. In the past, if you were born a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, etc., that was a life sentence. Now in the United States, 25-30% of the population changes its religious denomination in its lifetime. In the past, sex and gender were considered elemental facts of life. Now it is widely argued that gender is constructed and (just about) nothing is fixed. In the past, if you were born a man, you died a man. If you were born a woman, you died a woman. Now, if you do not like your gender, you can switch! This may appear to be a humorous observation until one begins to grasp the solvent effect of choice on values and codes of behavior. When roles were perceived as genetically fixed, then there was strong differentiation using traditional definitions. When everything can be chosen, there is widespread questioning about the very definition of what is feminine, what is masculine and whether there are any essential differences.

Political: The peak of this process so far is found in the triumph and transformation of democracy. More people live under democracy than ever before in human history. Even the dictatorships which persist must pay lip service to the rights of the governed and the right of self-determination. In the United States, democratization has led to the breakdown of the monolithic White Anglo-Saxon Protestant paradigm of Americanism. The replacement is a frankly pluralist culture in which the right to participate fully without giving up one's distinctive values or identity is strongly upheld. Jews have been major beneficiaries of this phenomenon. Indices of anti-Semitism have declined sharply over the past five decades. Interest in Jewish culture and religion has soared in all sectors of the population. References in popular culture to Jewish experiences and words have expanded exponentially. Non-Jewish parents have become more receptive to having Jewish sons- and daughters-in-law, which accounts for some of the rise in intermarriage rates. Jews have won access to every area of achievement and advancement – and there is much greater acceptance of the principle that they can stay distinctively Jewish as they integrate and advance. Reflecting the new situation, the first serious Jewish candidate for President, Senator Joseph Lieberman, is a highly visible, practicing Jew who openly draws upon his tradition's wisdom in articulating a vision of what is good for America.

This is a cultural revolution. People can choose to be whatever they want to be (or so they perceive). The outside exclusion and hostility, as well as the ignorance of the Other that

operated to keep people anchored in their born categories, are steadily weakening. How then can you hold people's loyalty under conditions of unparalleled freedom? You must win the approval of people's minds and hearts on a voluntary basis. This is an amazing moment in the history of civilization – and it generates a crisis for every group and identity. In this country, one cannot coerce. Because of the openness of society and the penetrating power of the universally present media, it is almost impossible to create a sheltered ghetto. One cannot depend on exclusion (or anti-Semitism in the case of Jews) to alienate individuals from others and to keep them on the reservation. There is only one way left to nurture identity and to communicate values. This is the way of education.

Education involves transmitting knowledge, persuading, and creating the experience of community, of being part of something bigger than one's self. If one creates a total environment in which the desired identity is compelling and the code of values is credible, then people will identify and commit. If the educational society is compatible and interactive with the general social environment, then the identity and the tradition will be carried over and practiced in the general culture. This educational approach is the only way to win hearts and minds on a voluntary basis.

It is a tremendous statement of human dignity (and of respect for Jews) that education now emerges as the primary method of winning lifetime loyalty. The centrality of learning is the hallmark of the achievement of freedom and of respect for the equality and autonomy of individuals. Now, every tradition must throw itself on the mercy of its participants and depend on its intrinsic value, on its capacity to evoke loyalty and to make life meaningful as the basis of membership. True, the initial impact of choice has been to undermine hitherto fixed identities and codes of behavior and to erode membership in many religions. In the long run, however, those groups/cultures/faiths that adapt and educate well will be compensated with a deeper loyalty, with the reward of group membership being based on dignity and value rather than on hostility and rejection. Why should Torah depend on external hatred and on Jews being persecuted for its survival? Our ancestors lived and died to witness to a loving God and to work for perfecting the world. Their sacrifice is trivialized when it is kept alive as a defensive reaction to the hostility of others.

Once we grasp the revolutionary situation in America, we realize that only education will succeed in transmitting Jewish identity and values, and that the day school is the most powerful educational medium that we possess. Of the teaching institutions, only day schools offer a total environment in which Judaism is represented at the highest levels by role models (teachers/principals/figures in the curriculum) equal to the general society. Only day schools offer the comprehensive knowledge base, the emotional experiences of community and the strong peer group which inculcate identity and values on a healthy, voluntary basis. (Camping, youth movements, Israel travel and study and adult retreats offer comparable experiences. They, too, are essential to the Jewish future, but they do not offer year-round, full day living conditions.) The more integrated the individual is in American life, the greater the need for day schools because the more participatory the family is in the society, the more the individual internalizes the undisputed right of choice. Whether the choice will translate into abandoning

Jewishness or appropriating it as a badge of honor and a guide to daily living will depend on the quality of one's education. That is why the main objection in the past generation to day school education – the fear that day school students might be separated or held back from smooth integration in the general society – is fading fast. That fear is now being overtaken by the realization that the more integrated the individual, the more he/she feels secure with an internalized identity. The person fully at home in America is at ease enough to welcome a heritage which can distinctively guide and inspire life in this environment so rich with lifestyle and ethical choices.

The question is: who will step forward to take responsibility for Jewish history as the Rabbis did almost two millennia ago? I would suggest that the lay leadership – especially of the day school movement – has this historic opportunity and mission. The Rabbis of old served both as educators and as organizers of the new institutions. After the destruction, the increased hiddenness of God in a world without a Temple made priests and prophets too 'sacramental,' too embedded in the trappings of the miracle – performing God of the Bible to be fully credible in the new setting. The Rabbis who came with no inherited dress code or traditional roles were able to go into every aspect of life – often as coworkers, fellow craftsmen and tradesmen – and teach and model the Jewish way of life. Then the Rabbis partnered with community leaders to build the network of schools and synagogues that provided the web of knowledge and community to sustain Jewish identity in a non-Jewish majority environment.

In a free society with every lifestyle and identity present and beckoning, the lay leadership often is the only Jewish presence available and credible to less affiliated Jews. By speaking and by personal example, lay people are the educators for thousands of Jews who are no longer in touch with traditional synagogues and community centers or with Rabbis who exemplify the inherited tradition. Moreover, in a free society, private money – voluntarily given rather than provided by the state – provides the prime sustenance for institutions and for community. The personal example of supporting day school education is the most powerful force to evoke higher levels of giving from individuals and communities alike. Every lay leader and donor in day school education has the opportunity to come together with like-minded others and carry out the greatest Jewish transformation of all time – the creation of a free Jew living in a voluntary community, attaining the highest level of knowledge and experience of any generation. The goal should be nothing less than a universal high literacy in which day school graduates are armed with the principles and methods of Torah learning, and infused with religious experience and ethics. Given access to all the treasures of Jewish tradition through study and technology, a new generation of free Jews would meet Isaiah's test of restoration, i.e., that "all your children are learned of the Lord."

This accomplishment would be the realization of the prophets' boldest dreams. Jeremiah spoke of a future renewal of the covenant in which loyalty is voluntary; in the absence of coercion, identity is written on the heart. Then, says Jeremiah, "all will know Me, from the littlest to the greatest..." (Jeremiah 31, 30 f.f.) Such an informed generation would enable Jewish life to flourish in freedom. Even more exciting, the Jewish community would serve as a light unto the nation. An educated Jewry would model how to turn free choice into committed values, how to

transmute personal autonomy into voluntary community, how to channel affluence into tzedakah/righteousness. Then Jews would be a role model and a blessing to the world. This is a mission worthy of the lay and spiritual leadership of this generation.