CHAPTER 6

What Is “Contemporary American Jewish Education”?

Abstract The descriptive meaning and usage of the phrase “Jewish education” is ambiguous in contemporary American Jewish life. In the tradition of linguistic philosophy of education, this chapter does not come to prescribe an ideology or philosophy of what contemporary American Jewish education should be, but rather identifies how the phrase “Jewish education” is used and understood in everyday parlance in American Jewish life.

Keywords Jewish education • Supplementary school • Day school • Jewish counterculture

Why Is this Question Different from All Other Questions?

Our travels have taken us to diverse venues, vocabularies, and versions of educational language. In this chapter, our journey will take us to the worlds and language of contemporary American Jewish education which—like Jewish education throughout the ages—is influenced both by internal Jewish educational contexts and by external general educational cultures in the diverse societies in which Jews have lived (Divan 2018). This chapter focuses on explicating the varied meanings of the phrase “contemporary American Jewish education”.

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As we have seen throughout this book, analytic philosophy of education focuses on language and words. However, sometimes in our efforts to analyze language, we need to utilize methods beyond printed words and sentences. The psychoanalyst Theodore Reik introduced the term “third ear” to refer to the periodic need to employ a mechanism beyond our two ears to “hear” the psyche of an individual or a phenomenon (Reik 1948). Oliver Sacks used the term “an anthropologist on Mars” to describe similar kinds of phenomena which call for alternative points of entry into understanding words and people (Sacks 1994). In this chapter, I believe that we can best profit from utilizing the eyes and ears of outsiders to enable us to hear what people mean when they talk about “Jewish education” today. Therefore, I have invited two anthropologists from Mars to join us to help delineate the diverse meanings of the phrase “contemporary American Jewish education”.

The Supplementary School

Our anthropologists from Mars begin their analysis by visiting a variety of venues where Jewish education happens in North American Jewish communities. The anthropologists immediately note that the majority of places where “Jewish education” takes place seem to be in brick-and-mortar structures physically connected to larger structures called “synagogues” located in diverse suburban and urban neighborhoods. These synagogues are modern and aesthetically pleasing buildings in which a sizeable sanctuary for prayer serves as a centerpiece along with other spaces such as libraries, rooms for social events and gatherings, and a “school wing” which encompasses one or more floors divided into classrooms. These classrooms are comparable to rooms in public schools, with white or black boards, movable desks, and some kind of table or desk at the front of the room for a teacher. The classrooms are decorated with pictures or drawings of Jewish scenes and objects and—most often—with a map of the State of Israel (one of the anthropologists with a special interest in cartography focuses on the diverse versions of these maps). The anthropologists are advised that while the various synagogues in a community might look alike, they are likely to be defined by or associated with distinct Jewish religious denominations that exist in American Jewish life. Such schools are denoted by an assortment of names: “Hebrew school”, “supplementary school”, “Sunday school”, “religious school”, and “family school” (the names keep changing). It quickly becomes clear that the students
coming to these schools (after a full day of public schooling) are mainly children of elementary school age. This framework has been the predomi-
nate form of American Jewish education from the mid-1950s into the twenty-first century.

The first conclusion is that the term “Jewish education” refers to a supplementary part-time religious schooling system mainly encompassing children between the ages of eight and thirteen.

**The View from Within**

Our Martian observers now switch their focus from “outside” to “inside” with a view to understanding the dynamics of education within these schools. The spiritual leader (rabbi) of the congregation serves as the leader of the synagogue complex, while the planning and functioning of the school is the responsibility of an “educational director” or “head of school”. Both the rabbi and the educational director are typically full-time professionals with academic training in Judaica, and frequently in education studies as well. A board of education or education committee responsible to the synagogue professional and lay leadership works together with the educational director in planning and implementation.

The faculty of the school is comprised of a variety of part-time instructors, including adults with teaching experience, college students engaged with Jewish life, and Israeli members of the local community with a facility in Hebrew, often accompanied by an expertise in Jewish content. Teachers in part-time schools receive a minimal salary, no benefits, and there are no national or regional degree or certification requirements.

The second conclusion is that supplementary synagogue education is overseen by qualified religious and educational leadership and implemented by part-time teachers generally without verifiable teaching credentials.

The Martians discover that every synagogue is an educational empire unto itself. While most synagogues are nationally affiliated, this does not impose specific goals, pedagogies or desired outcomes for individual schools. In many ways each school is a kingdom unto itself.
The third conclusion is that American Jewish education is a dramatic example of decentralized localized educational planning.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL TODAY, SWEET LITTLE CHILD OF MINE?**

The astute Martians quickly discover that it is impossible to define the curriculum of Jewish supplementary schooling since the decentralized nature of this framework results in diverse forms and formats of curricula and courses of study. At the same time, it does seem possible to cite main categories and contents of study in American Jewish supplementary schools:

- Jewish holidays
- The Jewish life cycle
- Hebrew decoding and liturgy usually linked to preparation for the bar and bat mitzvah ceremony
- The Holocaust
- Israel
- Spirituality, ethics, and social responsibility

These topics and themes reflect an overall concern with the presentation of core ideas and practices of Jewish holidays and rites of passage, an introduction to events and ideas of “the Jewish experience” past and present, and a discussion of the role of ethics and social responsibility in Jewish life. At the same time a central task of this elementary schooling is the educational, spiritual, and practical preparation of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds for the rite of passage known as bar or bat mitzvah.

The fourth conclusion is that the majority of these schools focus on Jewish holidays, the Jewish life cycle, the Holocaust, Israel, ethics and social responsibility, and preparation for bar and bat mitzvah.

**THE DAY SCHOOL**

Our Martians discover another type of institution, one which services a much smaller number of elementary school-age children, but which is regarded as an important part of the contemporary American Jewish educational scene: the “day school”, “academy” or “yeshiva”. Such institutions (typically encompassing grades one through eight), are private
all-day schools providing general and Jewish studies in one venue within the framework of a normal school day. A smaller number of all-day secondary Jewish schools also exists, modeled on the network of elite private high schools in America. Both elementary and secondary Jewish day schools are led by credentialed and recognized educational professionals who typically have advanced education in Jewish studies. Teachers of general studies are generally full-time professionals who must be credentialed and licensed by local or regional school districts. Teaching Jewish studies in day schools is also usually a full-time position and staffed by teachers with appropriate Jewish background and pedagogic skills. However, there are no local or state accreditation requirements for teaching Jewish subjects in Jewish schools and hiring is in the hands of the school leadership. Many of these schools are denominationally affiliated with a specific religious grouping, though there are also community Jewish day schools whose aim is to service the needs of a community regardless of denomination. Finally, it is important to note that above and beyond its school function, the day school in American Jewish life reflects the desire to create an all-encompassing and inclusive Jewish community of children, siblings, parents, and peers that share holidays and special events together.

The fifth conclusion is that American Jewish education includes a subcategory of private all-day schools providing a dual curriculum of Jewish and general studies, while at the same time shaping an active and engaged shared Jewish communal environment.

THE JEWISH EDUCATIONAL COUNTERCULTURE

Our Martian anthropologists discover a vibrant network of informal or experiential frameworks aimed at young American Jews: summer camps, community centers, ideological youth groups, socially oriented youth organizations, museums, social media, heritage travel, Israel experience, webinars, and podcasts. Professor Ben Jacobs has denoted frameworks as “countercultural” in the sense that they are “something that pushes up against or in some cases pushes back against” the status quo notion of “education” rooted in “schooling”. (Jacobs in Chazan et al. 2017; Roszak 1969). These counter cultural activities co-opt real life settings and create learner-centered immersive experiences that typically focus on contemporary questions, issues, topics, and problems related to Jewish life. These frameworks develop programs that actively engage twenty-first-century American teenagers and college-aged emerging adults and enable them to
experience a Jewish life that is intellectually and emotionally compelling. This experiential system is staffed by accessible role models who are able to understand the worlds of their younger peers and to convey excitement and passion about being Jewish.

The sixth conclusion is that a dynamic and diverse network of informal, experiential Jewish programming exists in American Jewish life, one which aims to convey an American Jewish life to the next generation of young Jews in ways they can relate to, appreciate, and understand.

A SURPRISE ADDITION

The anthropologists think that their job is just about done when they stumble upon a fascinating phenomenon in American Jewish life that communal leaders often omit from the Jewish educational landscape. In twenty-first-century America, there are a multitude of colleges and universities—both state and private—that offer a robust menu of courses, concentrations, and majors (as well as master’s and PhD programs) in academic Jewish studies. Both in terms of geography and content areas, the range of this network is huge. It encompasses colleges and universities across North America and academic Jewish topics that span the disciplinary spheres of religion, anthropology sociology, psychology, history, economics, literature, music, and more. Courses in these departments are staffed by the best and brightest of academics whose life’s passion and profession is teaching and research. These frameworks and these academics have essentially created a new educational framework in which post-adolescent American youth can study and understand the diverse dimensions of Jewish civilization in a rigorous academic framework.

The seventh conclusion is that in the past 75 years of American life, a new, powerful, and dramatic frontier of rigorous academic study of Judaism located in American universities has emerged, one which constitutes a significant framework for the serious study of Jewish civilization.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN JEWISH EDUCATION A REPORT

1. Our charge was to clarify the meaning of the phrase “contemporary American Jewish education”.
2. Our conclusions are:
   • There are multiple nuances and frameworks implied by the term “American Jewish education” and no one meaning is definitive.
• Quantitatively, the most prominent meaning of the term “Jewish education” refers to part-time, supplementary, religious, denominational, elementary Jewish schooling.
• The majority of contemporary American Jews do not have systemic post-elementary Jewish schooling.
• The phrase “American Jewish education” also refers to a network of private day elementary and high schools under Jewish patronage.
• A diverse network of informal and experiential Jewish educational opportunities outside the framework of formal schooling exists in twenty-first-century Jewish life.
• An important Jewish educational framework of Jewish studies exists at the college level, which for some reason is not regarded as an integral part of American Jewish education.

3. An analysis of the diverse formats of American Jewish education indicates that since the arrival of Jewish immigrants in America at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the American Jewish community has expressed an ongoing concern and commitment to create and to perpetuate frameworks dedicated to the continuation and enrichment of Jewish life in America (Graff 2008).

4. There are indications of efforts in twenty-first-century Jewish life to reconsider and create new frameworks aimed at creating an “educational ecosystem”, which might encompass major new educational innovations and frontiers for American Jewish life. (Woocher and Woocher 2000).

5. We hope we have answered your linguistic questions. On a final personal note, we’d like to add that we have enjoyed our visit very much and we are impressed. You have indeed shown that one can be American and Jewish. We understand that the systems you created in the mid-twentieth century served the community’s needs in those times. Now, we believe that you should consider re-shaping existing frameworks and creating new ones in order to confront a host of questions and needs that characterize twenty-first-century young American Jews and American Jewish life, such as “Why be Jewish?”; “Jewish education for what?”; “How is all this related to my life as a human being?”; and “What does being Jewish have to do with my other beliefs, commitments, and ideologies?”

Good luck!
Your friends from Mars
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