

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

because educators think before they teach

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Teaching for Commitment

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School-wide planning · How do we engender commitment?
Commitment and Independence

Perspective on Jewish Education

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Teaching for Commitment

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Toward an Understanding of Jewish Commitment

Micah Lapidus

Micah Lapidus examines a broad range of literature, expanding on quotes with direct bearing on understanding the complex nature of commitment in our era.



Judah ben 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, at eighteen for marriage, at twenty for seeking a livelihood...

– *Mishnah Avot*, 5:24

How would this *mishnah* read in the context of the contemporary North American Jewish community? A skeptic might “modernize/parody” the text as follows: “At five years the age is reached for soccer and kindergarten, at ten for little league, at thirteen maybe a bar mitzvah, at fifteen drivers education, at eighteen an elite Ivy League school, at twenty declare a major...”

The question of Jewish commitment is at least as old as Judah ben Tema. While commitment can be hard to define and even difficult to “know it when we see it,” it is a concept that has been addressed,

both explicitly and implicitly by many great thinkers throughout history. While commitment can be viewed in narrow terms as type of legal obligation or pledge to perform a future action, my hope is to demonstrate that commitment should be understood in much broader terms.

Framing remarks

Educating toward commitment is decidedly not about setting an educational standard for the teaching of a subject and measuring the extent to which a student has or has not achieved that standard. Rather “commitment” as an existential category of

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being needs to *be* the standard – the overarching educational goal. If commitment is the standard then authentic assessments and learning activities are those that create experiences that allow each child/learner to practice making Jewish choices, utilizing Jewish resources, and using Jewish vocabulary. If we want to educate toward commitment then we need to ask the right question. Bethamie Horowitz's (2002) qualitative question of, "How are American Jews Jewish?" is much more in line with an educational philosophy of commitment than the quantitative query: "How Jewish are Jewish Americans?"

That Judaism has managed to maintain the commitment of Jews in spite of the Jewish people's tendency to frame our story in the most lachrymose terms is nothing short of a miracle.

Proposition

Jewish commitment should be the overarching goal of a Jewish day school education. Educating toward commitment is a broad endeavor. It means defining Jewish education, the role of Jewish educators, and the concept of Jewish commitment in ways that are aligned with one another and respond to the powerful forces of modern society that have, for the most part, been viewed as weakening rather than strengthening/challenging Judaism and the individual Jew. This author's personal bias is that Jewish commitment is only meaningful if it embraces the challenges, complexities, and opportunities that exist in contemporary North American culture. Jewish commitment entails empowering the individual Jew to live a Jewish life of integrity while engaging in the fullness of modern life.

Aphorisms on commitment

The following aphorisms are arranged chronologically on the basis of the texts that have inspired them. Each of them is meant to be a piece of a puzzle that is admittedly incomplete. The author welcomes the opportunity to explore the concept of Jewish commitment alongside others who have different thoughts and opinions.

A foundation for commitment

"Lear: Why no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing."
– Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 1 Scene 4, circa 1603

Commitment cannot emerge *ex nihilo*. There must be raw material. This raw material can be the content and subject matter of Jewish education – the stuff that the learner has encountered through their formal Jewish education. It can also be the home life from which the child emerges though unfortunately this often amounts to the most profound kind of "nothing" or worse. The raw material can be attitudes, relationships, and even false notions about Judaism. Ultimately, "nothing" represents the inability to awaken any sense of purpose or interest in the learner. It is the job of the educator to deny the possibility of the "nothing" and to bring out from each student the possibility of a "something" that may serve as a foundation for the construction of commitment.

Beyond the cognitive

"Make him feel it, or he will never know it."

– Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, Book 4, 1762

There are at least two meanings to the word "feel" – to touch, or to be touched. The former is corporeal, the latter spiritual or emotional. Educating toward commitment is not about cold knowledge. It is not about memorization. Commitment involves feeling, either touching or being touched. To that end stories should take precedence over facts because stories touch us and

facts do not. Stories stick and facts bounce off. There is a growing body of literature emphasizing the power of narrative/story over fact/information. (See, for example, Pink, 2005; Gladwell, 2000). Without engaging the feeling heart and spirit, commitment will remain a cognitive impossibility. The student may know that they should (fill in the blank) but almost certainly never will. In the words of e.e. cummings, "Since feeling is first who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you."

Love

"We forget that God loves the learner."

– Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 1844

Love usually animates the best in all people. Commitment without love is emptiness and love with commitment is ephemeral and false. Commitment is an effect for which love is the primary cause. There are times when love does not animate the best in people. As with love there are times when commitment is misguided, inappropriate, even unhealthy. Just as love can be blind and fanatical, so can commitment.

God's love for humanity is expressed by virtue of the many gifts that God has given us – the ability to think and feel, the ability to create and care, and the ability to act morally. When we dedicate our God-given gifts toward a particular end or value then it makes sense to speak of meaningful commitment. Meaningful commitment is thoughtful, soulful, creative, and moral. As educators we participate in a kind of *imitatio Dei* when we cultivate these God-given gifts within our students. In so doing we empower them to choose to live committed lives.

Commitment and the nature of learning

"To lead you to an overwhelming question..."

Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'

Let us go and make our visit."

– T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1917

It is not enough to ask of Judaism "What is it?" The educator must say to the student, "Let us go and make our visit." "What is it?" is an academic question. By virtue of the question's syntax, Judaism

Without engaging the feeling heart and spirit, commitment will remain a cognitive impossibility.

is an “it.” An “it” is a curriculum, a body of knowledge, something static. At its best, an “it” is something the meaning of which is apprehended by a rational agent who has two possible avenues of response: 1) to try to know the “it” as he thinks it actually is, or 2) to try to define the “it” as he wants it to be or in accordance with his limited capacity. Regardless the knower and the object in the context of, “What is it?” exist in a detached way that emphasizes mutual alienation. “Let us go and make our visit,” on the other hand evokes an image of teacher leading learning toward an engagement with something. When teacher and learner embark on a visit together the learning process opens itself to the possibility of commitment. The willingness to “visit” is already a form of commitment, and the possibility of the learner being changed by virtue of the visit is a potential that does not exist when the educational process asks only, “What is it?”

Toward a methodology of building commitment

“Start with one note. One word. Chant it over and over forty different ways.”

– William Carlos Williams, *The Great American Novel*, 1923

Commitment means a willingness to embark on a process. It means a willingness to aspire to know, feel, or own something. It means the possibility of an idea becoming a mantra, becoming a part of who you are. It means turning something over and over again in your heart, your mind, and in your hands. As ben Bag Bag taught millennia ago (*Avot* 5:25), *Hafokh bah vahafokh bah, dekhulah bah* (=Turn it over and over again, for everything is within it). Commitment means dedicating oneself to deep reading. Commitment means dedicating oneself to reading deeply, sometimes at the expense of reading widely. Commitment is achieved not through habituation, but through mindfulness. It is measured by deepening wisdom rather than mechanical recitation.

Imagination and commitment

“The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme... Then at last will the world be made anew.”

– William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, 1923

If we, as educators, are committed to one thing, we might strongly consider

of the imagination. Judaism is, at its heart, an imaginative tradition. Whether we point to Abraham’s imagination or whatever imagination might have imagined Abraham, Judaism’s sheer power is manifested in the historical fact that as it developed into a way of life it led to “a world made anew.” Educators must be willing to let their students’ imaginations “rage and kill” if only to intoxicate their students with a sense of the possible rather than the necessary. Judaism has always been an idol-smashing doctrine. If the imagination wishes to take up a hammer so be it. Let our students know



committing our efforts to the cultivation

that they are welcome to knock away from within rather than evicting those who would dare to be bold.

Hopeful education

“Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man.”

– Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 1934

The study of Judaism should generally be uplifting. This is not the same thing as saying that the study of Judaism should be light or fun. Uplift can occur when the learner’s mind is so challenged that they forgo their need to go to the bathroom because they’ve temporarily forgotten that they have a body. Uplift can also be form of empowerment – learning that allows the learner to move from a narrow place to a less narrow place is uplifting, from a place deep down in the valley to the awesome mountaintop. That Judaism has managed to maintain the commitment of Jews in spite of the Jewish people’s tendency to frame our story in the most lachrymose terms is nothing short of a miracle. Though Jewish commitment can certainly be awakened through the study (and unfortunately the experience) of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, at least one of the enduring understandings of such study should be that the human spirit cannot be restrained in its journey toward uplift. In other words, commitment is only meaningful when hope is real. To speak of educating toward commitment merely so that the crew goes down with the ship is absurd. The learner must be inspired to believe in a present and future that are worthy of commitment.

Commitment as the expression of freedom

“For freedom from restriction, the negative side, is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation.”

– John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 1938

Coerced commitment is oxymoronic, unethical and better suited for a fascist than a democratic state. Commitment can and must be grounded in freedom. Freedom, in its truest sense, is not “just another word for nothing left to lose” (as Bobby McGee once suggested), but rather the freedom to commit to and achieve purposes that give life meaning. Dewey presents a challenge that all Jewish educators in the modern world face, particularly in North America – educate toward commitment grounded in freedom. Rather than viewing freedom as a weakening force in Jewish life, Jewish educators must fully embrace the potential that exists in the context of a free society. It may be that Judaism will become a Judaism of free, willful, and committed Jews. If this is the case then it is reasonable to presume that many Jews will cease to be Jews for all the well-known and well-documented reasons. It is the task of the Jewish educator to inspire and empower as many students as possible to join this “coalition of the willing” and be committed.

Acknowledging the learner

“Boy: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, Sir?”

Vladimir: Tell him... (*he hesitates*)... tell him you saw us. (*Pause.*)

The Lookstein Center mourns the tragic loss of

Larry Roth ז"ל

נחום אליעזר בן יוסף הכהן ז"ל

who was committed to living a life of *lev tov* (Avot 2:12),
and who deeply believed that Jewish education was
about reaching the hearts of the students - cultivating
these hearts to becoming kind and loving Jews.



You did see us, didn't you?

Boy: Yes Sir."

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 1954

If we, as educators, ask our students to see the power and richness of Judaism we must also commit ourselves to seeing the power and richness of our students. We cannot nurture an authentic commitment to Judaism without seeing our students for who they are. Though we thank God as *Pokeah Ivrim* (=Who Opens the eyes of the blind), many educators do not take seriously their obligation to seeing their students. We have grown accustomed to a superficial kind of seeing due, in part, to the lack of time allotted for self-reflection. Given our constant busyness there is little time for self-reflection in today's world. It is therefore not surprising that our society is characterized by a conspicuous lack of self-knowledge. If we educators are not committed first and foremost to seeing ourselves then we will never see our students as human beings. If we are unable to see our students then we will inevitably lack the authority to challenge them to see Jewish tradition in a way that will inspire commitment.

Commitment as the alignment of thought and being

"I am my own psychic phenomena in so far as I establish them in their conscious reality... . But I am not those psychic facts, in so far as I receive them passively and am obliged to resort to hypotheses about their origin and their true meaning, just as the scholar makes conjectures about the nature and essence of an external phenomenon."

– Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 1956

Commitment is an existential category of being. Commitment is the conscious alignment of certain attitudes and behaviors at any given time. It means consciously and conscientiously declaring that "I am for something" in the exact moment that my being enacts what my conscious mind and conscience are in the process of declaring. Commitment is not an academic subject. I cannot be truly committed to a belief that is handed down to me and that I passively receive. I can only be committed to beliefs that I establish in my "conscious reality." Too often students of Judaism fall prey to several injurious tendencies such as going through the motions or uncritically adopting the opinions and beliefs of their teachers. Too often students are afraid to construct their own "conscious reality" because of the judgmental gaze of an Other which attempts to lock them into a different kind of being. Commitment is not a static concept, it is a dynamic one. Commitment exists whenever action and thought are unified. To the extent that Jewish educators can convey the concept of commitment as being rooted in existential authenticity students may ultimately come to be more self-reflective and less judgmental of others. They may also have a way of assessing the integrity of their present life.

Commitment expressed through criticism

"Modern criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state. It has ended up, in effect, as a handful of individuals reviewing each other's books."

– Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 1984

Judaism is an interpretative tradition. As such, criticism is a time-honored tradition within Judaism so long as the criticism comes from a place of commitment. The individual Jew is invited to criticize both Judaism and the broader, secular world. However criticism is not meant to be a flippant or destructive activity. On the contrary – it is a deliberate and constructive one. It requires

Jewish education that seeks to instill a sense of commitment must accustom students to "taking a stand" for what they believe in and a willingness to get their feet and hands dirty.

commitment. In order to criticize, one must first understand and empathize. One cannot understand and empathize without committing oneself to serious consideration of the other's point of view, whoever that other may be. If the end result of serious inquiry is criticism then surely criticism is a manifestation of commitment. When one engages in criticism one enters into conversation. Conversation is only meaningful when it is dialogic. Criticism invites reciprocal criticism. If one is to stand behind their ideas then criticism requires commitment and also the openness to change. The antithesis of true criticism is *pilpul* (=mindless banter). Educators educate toward commitment when they inspire, equip and require their students to become critics. Students become critics when they recognize the futility of *pilpul* and the vulnerability of criticism and lend their voices to the ongoing discussion of Judaism.

Taking seriously the ideas of children

"Spontaneously, without any theological training, I, a child...came to question the basic thesis of Christian anthropology, namely, that man was created in God's image. Either/or: either man was created in God's image – and God has intestines! – or God lacks intestines and man is not like Him."

– Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984

As Jewish educators we must be committed to taking the intellectual and emotional lives of children seriously. History attests to the fact that adult human beings have decidedly not figured out "best practices" for living. Nor have we figured out how to create the best of all possible worlds. It is wholly possible that all education is mis-education, or at least the vast majority. In teaching children to think we are, at least in part, teaching them how not to think. In so far as education involves teaching the child to surrender their ideas to those of experts or authorities and conform their thought processes to certain sanctioned routines we negate the possibility of meaningful thought and authentic commitment in children. Meaningful commitment requires the undiluted richness of mind, heart, and spirit. If we are serious about educating toward Jewish commitment we need to consider the status of the learner's personal and innate knowledge and find ways to cultivate it rather than extinguish it.

Toward an Understanding of Jewish Commitment

Two perspectives on the concept of “burden”

“The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life’s most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.”

– Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984

“Before the beginning of the nineteenth century all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege; since then most Jews have come to regard it as a burden.”

– Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 1934

How does Kundera’s notion of “the heaviest of burdens” as “an image of life’s most intense fulfillment” influence our reading of the opening line of Mordecai Kaplan’s *Judaism as a Civilization* (above)? How can the Jewish educator transform the feeling of burden that Kaplan describes, with its negative connotations, into the burden that Kundera describes? Kundera’s burden is one that connects the bearer with the earth, with reality,

and with truth. Kaplan’s burden is one that keeps the bearer bent, buckled and ultimately broken. For starters, to speak of Jewish commitment is to speak of a life that is *grounded* in Judaism. To speak of Jewish commitment is to speak on one’s ability to take a stand with both feet planted firmly on Jewish soil. When Moses approached the burning bush and found his life’s destiny he was told, “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Just as the bowler hat floating in midair is a central image for Kundera’s novel so, too, is the bare foot planted firmly on the earth a metaphor for Jewish commitment. Jewish education that seeks to instill a sense of commitment must accustom students to “taking a stand” for what they believe in and a willingness to get their feet and hands dirty.

Conclusion

Commitment is much more than an educational aspiration. It is an existential modality of being. In light of the various perspectives and voices of the preceding

aphorisms it is reasonable to ask how Jewish day schools might educate toward Jewish commitment. In other words how can this multivocal discussion of commitment translate into the world of practice?

First and foremost “commitment” must be more than a three-syllable “C” word in a round of “buzzword bingo.” Educators who are interested in Jewish commitment (ostensibly there are many) must turn to their bookshelves and articulate a theory of commitment that conveys their own personal understanding of what commitment looks like. One can easily imagine a colloquium where Jewish educators come together to share their views on “commitment.” “Commitment” is a great topic for a professional learning community to discuss in the context of a community of practice such as a Jewish day school.

Another way in which Jewish day schools can establish cultures of commitment is through the faculty that they employ. When schools seek to fill positions, especially in Judaic Studies and Language Arts, and other core humanities, they



might ask potential candidates their views about the place of “commitment” in education. If commitment is a value for the school then candidates should be assessed on the basis of whether they might be able to advance the school’s goal of educating toward commitment.

Postscript

When teaching the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* I always include a conversation on the words of the prophet Hosea that are customarily recited during the laying of *tefillin*:

“I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in loving kindness and in compassion” (Hosea 2:9).

I point out that these words are recited at two times in a person’s life: while laying *tefillin* and (in some traditions – ZG) under the *huppah*. Any Jewish educational view of commitment must acknowledge that commitment is expressed through both regular and exceptional acts. Moreover, commitment is more than just a human attitude, it is a way of expressing our love for and desire to know God.

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