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Moral Outrage IN EDUCATION

On Being a Jew and a Boston Braves Fan: Alone and Afraid in a World I Never Made

In the Beginning

Much of my family's story is achingly and painfully familiar, part of the narrative of Jewish experience that allows one to use the words routine and tragic in the same sentence. Both my parents were born in the same shtetl in what is now Ukraine, just south of Kiev, and each of them witnessed the murder of a parent by bandits in the chaos and tumult of the Russian civil war. Both fled in terror and made their individual ways as teenagers across Europe by the grace of luck, grit, bribes, some kind people, a network of Jewish agencies, and God knows what else. They eventually arrived in Boston in the early twenties, got married and settled down to a life of poverty, struggle, fear, and grief.

Their life spans coincided with World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, the Red scare, the Depression, the rise of Fascism, the New Deal, World War II, the Holocaust, the Atomic age, the Cold War, McCarthyism, the establishment of the state of Israel, the Korean War, the Civil Rights Movement, the war in Viet Nam, the Watergate scandals, and the assassinations of Archduke Ferdinand, Leon Trotsky, Mohandas Gandhi, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy.

Politically, they were basically radicals but their commitment to socialism was always delimited by their fear of Stalin and the traditions of virulent Russian anti-Semitism. They adored FDR but were tempted to vote for Norman Thomas, they were strong supporters of the labor



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movement, and they thought that government was there to protect us from big business. They almost always voted and followed political campaigns with great interest and acumen.

They had read Gogol and Tolstoy in Russian, Sholom Aleichem and the brothers Singer in Yiddish, and Dorothy Parker and Philip Roth in English. They had seen Menashe Skulnik, Maurice Schwartz, and Molly Picon on the stage, in the movies and on television and heard them on the radio, likewise Mary Martin, Helen Hayes, and Paul Newman. They loved Sid Caesar's comic genius, were scornful of Milton Berle's vulgarity, and were much more devoted to *Playhouse 90* than to any sitcom. They never went to a proper school.

They did this in between the frustrating and backbreaking tasks of running a small grocery store, beset with a shrinking clientele and ferocious competition from "the chain stores" and the overwhelming chores that come with parental responsibilities. They had five children (one of whom died from a ruptured appendix at the age of two) each one of whom provided them with opportunities for pride, aggravation, hopes, and disappointments. They had their share of existential crises, marital disputes, major illnesses, and probably less than their share of joys, triumphs, and celebrations.

They were indeed complicated folks, often loving and generous, sometimes mean-spirited and spiteful; always worried and fearful; usually secretive and guarded; capable of genuine gaiety and laughter, and yet ultimately presenting a morose image of themselves as victims, surviving with poignant dignity but struggling to control their demons of terror, fear, and despair. They were very intelligent, even wise; well read; politically sophisticated; sort of open-minded but also wary and skeptical of change. Their attitudes toward their Jewish and American identities were complicated, full of fierce loyalties but laced with ambivalence, ambiguity, and paradox.

They certainly wanted their children to be Jewish, but their modes of acculturation were irregular and unfocused. For one thing, and probably for reasons much more psychological than ideological, they purposefully decided *not* to live in a Jewish neighborhood, which gave us all the opportunity to interact with a predominantly Irish Catholic, working-class community, one which at best aspired to and occasionally reached attitudes of strained toleration toward "kikes." My parents put heavy stress on Yiddishkeit, were only mildly observant although strict on some issues (no mixing of dairy with meat, no pork or shrimp, no school on the Holidays, at least most of the time). Although they were both quite knowledgeable about religious practices

and traditions they expressed a skeptical if not cynical attitude towards religious institutions. They were apprehensive, suspicious, and patronizing of *goyim* and contemptuous of assimilating and socially ambitious Jews, whom they called "all-rightniks." They taught us to read Yiddish authors but not the Torah; they discussed/argued political and social but not theological issues with us; and they insisted that we remember and revere our heritage as Jews, even as they disavowed the Jewish God.

I went to Hebrew school four days a week (after public school and on Sundays) and became a bar mitzvah. That was the only formal Jewish education I ever had, and although I learned to read and write Hebrew, it was a very threadbare education at best. And yet I have become convinced that with all the mixed signals and missed opportunities, and all the other craziness in my home, my parents provided me with some critically important and energizing notions that have helped to shape my worldview, one that clearly has a strong Jewish flavor.

In retrospect these Jewish influences that came from my childhood seem to have influenced my professional work more than they did my personal life. (But that's another story.) In some ways my professional foci (citizenship education, critical thinking, clinical supervision, critical pedagogy, moral education), even as they shifted, all seemed to have common resonance with some of the more visible Jewish values. However, this did not become clear to me till I came to write *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, the work that best represents my professional concerns and value commitments.

I have to confess that I often felt inspired while I was actually writing this book. By that I emphatically do not mean that the book was ghostwritten by some divine author but rather that I sensed that I had entered a different kind of space, a mysterious space made special and exciting because it seemed to be sacred. I do not believe that I would have been open to this experience had I not just read Abraham Joshua Heschel's monumental and truly inspired work *The Prophets*. When I read it I was afraid I would hyperventilate, so powerful, so profound, and so compelling was it to me. I knew that the paradigm of prophetic thought focusing on a God of history, justice, and mercy who strives in covenant with humanity to create a loving and just community that Heschel so eloquently and passionately describes was and is the one for me. What was so extraordinary was the way Heschel's book was simultaneously familiar and new to me. The substantive elements were all new to me, in truth, up to that point I had zero idea of the signifi-

cance of the Prophets—who they were, what they did and said, and what they represented. And yet the essential message seemed to be in harmony with my intuitive sense of what constitutes the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. What was annoying to me was that it had taken me so long to find this paradigm. What was mysterious to me was how I had somehow come to resonate with this basic language in spite of my unfamiliarity with the particular literature.

What was also inspirational was that I was struggling with something far more important and worthwhile than my usual limitations and constraints, nothing less than the opportunity to write within that sacred paradigm. How successful or unsuccessful I was in this responsibility is not totally clear to me but one thing did become apparent to me. I had discovered that an essential part of the moral and spiritual grounding of my work had always been there. The exciting thing was that this came to me in such a mysterious way, and the embarrassing thing was that I didn't really know very much about this grounding.

This account only partially explains why the book that eventually emerged, while certainly stressing the centrality of the prophetic tradition, does not speak directly to the Jewish sensibility that permeates it. It took me a long time to fully recognize, as some of my colleagues told me early on, that I had written a Jewish book without saying so. It took me much less time to recognize that if I indeed had written within Jewish traditions, I had done so as an amateur. Hence my agenda became clear. I needed to know a lot more about this grounding, and so I have read and continue to do a lot of reading and studying of traditional Jewish sources. I am finding it to be both exciting and frustrating, both accessible and opaque, simultaneously compelling and remote. I also realized that I needed to be a lot more explicit about my Jewish orientation and have made some tentative and modest steps in that direction in my writing and teaching.

I have taken the time to write about my parents and my personal background partly to highlight the difficulty of factoring out the Jewish dimension of my life from the myriad of other influences and factors, be they psychological, historical, sociological, or characterological in nature. It is easy enough to say that my parents were Jewish, that I grew up in a Jewish home, and that I consider myself to be a Jew. After that it's very hard. Not only is it excruciatingly difficult to explain what I have said about my Jewish background and identity but it is also exceedingly difficult to sort out and explain the enormously complicated dynamics of the matrix of personal, cultural, circumstantial, contingent, and societal events that shape my consciousness. In-

deed, it is this complexity that makes this writing assignment so challenging, so difficult, and so risky. Furthermore, when it came time for me to begin to work on the assignment, I realized that my customary professional discourse and writing style were not going to be of much help and more likely would be counterproductive in addressing the questions of the integration of my personal and professional lives.

The task would seem to require serious self-interrogation, a process that I have so far assiduously and successfully neglected and avoided. Indeed, I have been so successful that I've had to think hard about a different approach that would at least enable me to make a good faith effort at writing this essay. This led me to understand that even though until fairly recently I had largely avoided careful, systematic self-examination of my Jewish identity, my Jewish consciousness has surely not evolved randomly, nor is it disconnected from my persona nor from my work. Rather, it is expressed in my attitudes, behaviors, and sensibilities and is lodged in the crowded, messy, and unswept compartments of my interiority.

In order to bring some order to this clutter, I decided to rely on, of all things (you should excuse the expression) my intuition. My intuition told me that I would have to dig deep to find some gems, but that these gems are stored in places that are dear and accessible to me. These places turn out to be the vast treasure of Jewish stories of all varieties, be they legends, tales, jokes, anecdotes, allegories, or midrashim. More particularly, the richest source of self-insight would be those stories that I especially love to read, hear, and tell over and over again. My intuition-driven reasoning is that I can learn a lot from those specific stories precisely because I continue to tell them. Their very persistence in my nervous system indicates that they resonate with my innermost sense of meaning. Therefore, I would like simply to tell a few of these stories and then reflect on their meaning and significance for me.

Before I tell these stories I will need to add a few more bits of autobiographical information that can help to describe and explain the interpretive orientation that I bring to the process. I now believe that one of the most revealing if not formative events of my life was my experience with the Boston Braves during the 1940s. This was a time when there were only sixteen major league baseball teams, and when Boston had franchises in both leagues. One of them was the incomparably more popular and more talented Red Sox; the other, usually referred to as the "hapless Braves," was a team with little or no talent and with few paying customers. As vaunted and revered

were the Red Sox as a team of destiny and redemption, the Braves were derided and dismissed as a source of shame and embarrassment. The Red Sox were celebrated, the Braves barely tolerated. Attendance at spiffy Fenway Park would range from twenty to thirty thousand, while the faithful who made their way to dingy Braves Field rarely numbered more than eight or ten thousand. Red Sox fans were brags and arrogantly demanding, just as Braves fans were humble and easily satisfied. If the Red Sox failed to finish first in the standings it was considered a miscarriage of justice while it was considered to be a moral triumph if the Braves finished sixth in an eight-team race. I was to become a devoted Braves fan.

How I got to be a Braves fan is fairly clear. One day during summer vacation I walked down to the local park and noticed that a man was passing out cards to other kids. Intrigued, I sidled over and made myself available, hoping that I might be included. It quickly became clear that the man was not discriminating and was pleased to give me or anyone else one of these cards. The card offered the holder free membership in the Boston Braves Knothole Gang, which entitled members to Pavilion admission to any weekday game for the price of thirty-five cents instead of the regular ninety cents. (I didn't know what Pavilion meant except that it was better and more expensive than the sixty-cent bleachers.) That's what led me to what was to be the first of countless visits to shabby, very uncrowded Braves Field.

However, the reason for the constancy of my loyalty in the face of continuous humiliation and disappointment remains elusive although less mysterious than it once was. Although I surely "liked" the Braves, I can't say that I admired them nor was I an adoring fan of any particular player. I can't say that I simply enjoyed going and listening to the games for I became very emotionally involved with whether or not they won (which they usually did not). If they won I would be elated but always aware that the happiness would be of very short duration. When they lost, I would be completely unsurprised but disconsolate nevertheless. I also have to admit that I secretly "hated" the Red Sox and their fans and nothing was sweeter in those scary wartime days than to read the newspaper on a day when the Braves won, the Red Sox lost, the Allies advanced, and the Nazis were repulsed.

I was also mystified by some of my friends who actually chose to root for teams outside of Boston (e.g., the New York Yankees or the St. Louis Cardinals) and appalled by the fact that their choice was based on the undoubted, but to me irrelevant, reality that these were

talented and winning teams. Not only did I believe that this was disloyal, but I thought it was a violation of the rules.

It is easy enough to attribute this strong identification, loyalty, and bonding to the developmental processes of early adolescence, but even with greater age and maturity I continued to feel connected and to feel that my well-being was somehow related to the fortunes of the various incarnations of the Braves from Boston to Milwaukee to Atlanta. Moreover, this has also come to be true for all the other Boston sports teams (including the Red Sox, whom I've come to forgive and embrace). The truth is that I still care a lot about how these teams fare, even as I realize how silly and dumb all this is and even more as I realize how well-nigh impossible it is for me to disconnect from these relationships, for try as I might, I cannot be indifferent to the fortunes of these teams.

In some ways the questions and quandaries concerning these connections are similar and parallel to the ones regarding my Jewish identity. Did I choose to be a Braves fan any more or less than I chose to be Jewish? Why is my loyalty to the Braves and Jews independent of anything Jews or Braves believe, do, or say? If the recruiter for the Red Sox Knothole Gang had been at the park a day earlier, would I have become a Red Sox fan? Was my initial bonding to the Braves a matter of obsession? A genuine symbiosis? An instance of self-indulgent pride and chauvinism? Or was it an example of true and profound commitment? Am I Jewish only because of the happenstance of birth, and do I have any more capacity to renounce my Jewish identity than I did to reject my Braves fandom? Did I continue to support the Braves because they were, presumably like my perception of Jews, oppressed, despised, and pitiful? Or was it vice versa? Did I resent the Red Sox because they were a metaphor for the smug, entrenched, and powerful goyim? Perhaps my two major identities were related by dint of their affording me the opportunity to have a unique identity in my neighborhood and/or to be oppositional; perhaps they both represented my status as marginal and minority; perhaps they reflected a concern for justice and mercy for the oppressed, or perhaps they both allowed me to wallow in martyrdom and victimization.

The Stories of My Life

As I have indicated, my plan is to continue this analysis primarily through the use of stories that are dear and compelling to me and that

seem to contain important insights into issues of Jewish identity. I have no intention of trying to define, explain, or analyze the concept of story, or the importance of stories to Jewish experience, or even the importance of narrative in a post-modern world. This is because (a) I don't know how to, (b) it's not relevant to my purpose, and besides, (c) it's story time.

The Mother and Her Son the Physicist

The mother of a renowned physicist, proud as she is of her son, feels frustrated that she doesn't really understand what he does, and asks him if he would explain Einstein's theory of relativity to her. The son, the physicist, has mixed feelings about this. He is touched by the gesture but fearful of the difficulty, the inevitable frustration, and the consequences of failure. Nonetheless, he proceeds cautiously and patiently, and miraculously the mother slowly but surely begins to understand more and more until she not only fully comprehends but is able to carry on a sophisticated dialogue with her son on theoretical physics. The son is ecstatic and feels good not only about what his mother has accomplished but also about the implications for science education. The mother is also very proud and happy but it is clear that she remains a bit puzzled and skeptical in spite of her achievement. She decides to share her uncertainty with her son and during a dinner time conversation, as he is summarizing yet again the major elements of Einstein's theory of relativity, she abruptly interrupts him. "Okay, okay," she insists, "I understand the theory fine, but, just tell me one thing, Sonny: Is it good for the Jews?"

This is a very old story and obviously gets subtly changed with the telling, but its shocking punch line has remained the same. There are some interesting and revealing dimensions of the story as told: the relationship between an adoring mother and an achieving son (Jewish jokes rarely speak of achieving daughters); the patient yet anxious son warily trying to please the insatiable demands of a clinging mother; and the paradox and ambiguity concerning the mother's level of intelligence and sophistication. However, the story's power would seem to pivot on the extraordinary reductionism in which sooner or later everything comes to be seen through the vulgar prism of Jewish chauvinism.

I love this story. I find it to be very funny in both its irony and its exaggeration. But I also love it because it has come to mean much

more to me than a good gag. For one thing, there is within the story the strong suggestion of the angst and insecurity that is so much part of Jewish experience, for the mother's question could easily be changed to "Is it going to be bad for the Jews?" The concern derives from a consciousness shaped by the requirement to be constantly alert to the possibility of danger including, if not especially, from seemingly benign sources. Paranoid Jew would seem to be a redundant term, and one cannot but identify with the courage of this woman to give voice to the kind of suspicion and wariness that many Jews nervously and embarrassingly feel about the unfamiliar. When we laugh at this woman we are no doubt reflecting our own difficulty in distinguishing absurd from genuine threats since we know that there are plenty of both in the land as we try to simultaneously protect ourselves from looking silly and being victimized. The mother in this story plays it safe; better we should ask, lest we get lulled into a false sense of security by the distractions of family ties and academic thought. In this instance, politics triumphs over concerns for both relationship and scholarship.

It's at this point that the smile weakens, the laughter begins to fade, and the anger and resentment start to appear. We are now back in touch with the reality that a whole people has come to be consigned to the condition of feeling constant and justifiable dread, a condition that speaks to centuries of enduring intolerable injustice, pain, and suffering.

There is additional wisdom here that is obscured by the mother's extreme ethnocentrism, for the story is a powerful statement about the inevitability of subjectivity, partisanship, and perspective. The mother is clearly single-minded in her interests, seemingly obsessively focused, seeing virtually everything solely from the perspective of what contributes to the welfare of Jews. Nowadays philosophers could easily term such phenomena as hermeneutical, while psychologists might call it projection, cultural critics could mark it as an instance of a particular interpretative narrative, ideologues might refer to it as bias, and pundits as spin control. To that extent, the mother's response is prototypically human but, of course, its highly exaggerated form takes it to the level of absurdity and exquisite irony. However, the story does teach us about the relationship between the external and the internal, while providing us with a lesson on the problematics of subjectivity, particularly of the dangers of zealotry and chauvinism.

So what does my fascination with this story tell me about my Jewish identity? The fact that the story is immediately accessible and un-

derstandable to me says already that I have a close affinity to some kind of Jewish community. I have to confess that I can both identify with and be repelled by the mother's paranoid obsessiveness and to that extent the story tends to have an alienating effect on me. In spite of this, the story also has within it the roots of quite a number of issues that are at the center of my work. As I've already indicated, the persistence of the fear and dread is so strong and vivid to me that I find it both impossible either to accept or to deny its implicit horror. It is no surprise to me that my teaching and writing is marked by continuous references to the unacceptable presence of enormous unnecessary human suffering and to the assertion that the educational process ought to be seen primarily in its relationship with the struggle for social justice.

This story has also required me to scrutinize my attitudes toward the mother, for even as I am embarrassed by her narrowness, I am moved by her sincerity and earnestness as well as the poignancy of her concerns for a loving relationship with her son and the well-being of the Jewish people. It is surely possible and important to be critical of her attempt to manipulate her son and to distort science but it is also important on a personal level to understand her perspective. We need to celebrate her commitments when we give her the benefit of the doubt, and to at least forgive her parochialism when we can't. The importance of giving the benefit of doubt, of affording understanding and compassion to people, and of searching for moral transcendence in "ordinary people" are themes and values that have intrigued and haunted me as I try to figure out the place of empathy, compassion, and affirmation in my notions of a redemptive education.

More critically, I value the story to the extent that it shows how piety and self-righteousness can mask self-serving, blind, and knee-jerk partisanship. The reaction of the mother in this story is to me a metaphor of a very common attitude among any number of strongly committed folks who so deeply identify with their group or cause that they can get carried away into excessive self-absorption and neurotic xenophobia. Surely this story could be easily adapted to the excesses of other beleaguered groups struggling for recognition and survival. There have been many, many times when I've wanted to tell this story in the context of having to listen to revisionist harangues which place a heretofore neglected group in the number-one spot on the victim list and into the very epicenter of what is most vital in the universe. A sensitivity to political correctness (and worrying about how this would

reflect on Jews) usually prevents me, but the devastating punch line is always there waiting only for the set-up: Tell me, at the core of things, is postmodernism (or existentialism, or critical theory) Good for women? For African-Americans? For gays? For the rain forest? or for that matter, the Braves? Just fill in the blanks.

Tell me, is this funny or not? Tell me, Ma, is this part of the Jewish tradition?

The King and the Poisoned Grain

This story is not from the world of jokes but from the realm of Hasidic lore and it is my understanding that it was originally told by Nachman of Bratzlav. However, I have recast the story from the two written versions I have seen and the many I have heard.

In a country long ago and far away, the prime minister comes breathless to the king with disturbing information. "Sire," he says, "I have the most dreadful news to report. The new crop of grain that our people have just completed gathering has been found to contain within it a poison of such power that it makes those who partake of it utterly mad. Since this crop is our only source of food, it is certain that all the men, women, and children of our kingdom will in a very short time become mad." The king is mortified to hear such grievous news and buries his head in his hands, sobbing with great bitterness and pain. "Do not despair, my king," says the prime minister, "for I have other information that surely will ease your pain. There is still some of last year's harvest left in the royal granary. Indeed Sire, there is enough for you and me to carry us through until the next harvest."

The king looks up, dries his tears and speaks softly but firmly to the minister. "No, this will not be done as I do not wish to be a sane ruler of a mad kingdom. Therefore, you and I will both eat of the new crop and we will become mad like everyone else. However, before we eat of the poisonous bread, we will each paint a red dot on our foreheads. In this way, we shall always know and remember that we are mad."

To me this is primarily a story about the importance of confronting and accepting both harsh realities and compelling responsibilities. The king is fully aware of the cruelty and the tragedy of the situation and in this desperate situation, does not grasp for straws and nor does he seek a personal escape hatch. The king's watchful minister also confronts reality head-on and accordingly has performed his bureaucratic

functions well; he has assembled the facts, assessed the available resources, developed options, and has a plan of action. What he lacks, however, is the king's wisdom and vision that extend beyond political survival to what is required for a long and difficult struggle for the kingdom to regain its sanity. What is minimally required is a recognition of the patent suffering that is sure to follow as well as of the limitations that will face the community in its struggles. Beyond that, the king knows that the responsibility of leadership rests with full membership in the community, not just politically but spiritually and existentially. The denial of the opportunity for special privilege not only affirms the king's solidarity with and compassion for his people, but his insight that he must experience and share their suffering if he is to presume to lead them.

The king is also wise enough to know about denial and the tendency to sentimentalize. He realizes immediately that even the powerful and wise will need to be reminded of what really is, what once was, and what might yet be. There is in this story a poignant message of the importance of awareness, memory, and vision and a hint at the dangers of denial, forgetting, and co-optation. The king is not worried about preserving the memory of nostalgia but about the preservation of the memory of lost capacities and aspirations. He seems to fear that the people will blur what they must face with what they might still transcend, thus forgetting in their confusion the memory of hope and possibility. In this story, realism and vision are not contradictory but complementary, not conflicting but synergistic, not a matter of forced choice but an opportunity for partnership.

I believe that this aspect of the story helps me to understand why I have been so wary if not contemptuous of educators who are so optimistic and gushy about the latest research finding, innovation, or change. I continue to be amazed at the cheerful hubris that surrounds the claims for the importance of new insights and the possibilities of the latest educational remedies. Don't they know that things usually don't work out and that in the long run Murphy triumphs? Don't they know how devilishly complicated human behavior is and how little we actually know about it? I guess such alienation and pessimism are part of the legacy of a Jewish Braves fan.

I also continue to be startled by the way we (I) continue in our lunatic educational practices, for not only do we persist in engaging in professionally sanctioned yet morally suspect behaviors, but we are also active in perpetuating and validating them. It is hard for me to

accept the fact that intelligent and good people do such destructive and corrupting things as grade students, compete for academic honors, participate in selective admissions, and develop merit pay schemes. One popular Jewish response to such determined forgetting, which is often expressed with an exaggerated shrug accompanied with a "Nu, so what can you do?" at least offers some recognition of the seriousness of the situation, but its inherent passivity is troubling. Another Jewish way, as reflected in this story, is the path that I have found to be more productive, and that path is the one of humility and agency in which we definitely act, but in the full awareness of our limitations and restrictions. Consequently, I find myself frequently quoting both in my teaching and writing the wonderful Talmudic adage: "The task is not ours to finish, but neither are we free to take no part in it."

Others see also in this story a major emphasis on the king's iron determination to maintain the Jewish community and his strong bond with the Jewish people, hence the story can be seen as a powerful affirmation of solidarity, community, and peoplehood. The king loves and identifies with these people, it would seem, primarily because he feels very strongly that he is one of them and they are part of him. Hence the very difficult question of distinguishing roots from meaning; to what degree do I value my Jewish roots because I value Jewish traditions and beliefs and to what degree do I treasure Jewish values because I cherish my Jewish roots? This tension between concern for the universal and connection with the particular, although by no means a monopoly of Jews, is perhaps at the center of the struggle represented in this book to integrate Jewish identity (concrete and particular) with the traditions of the Enlightenment (abstract and universal).

There are, in addition, some dimensions to this story that continue to cast dark shadows for me. What are we to make of the king and the kingdom if we are interpret them respectively as metaphors for God and for Israel, as is often the case in Hasidic stories? Is God seeking even closer involvement with His people and/or does He seek to offer hope and support only in times of profound crisis? Is there a suggestion here that the whole world has gone mad and that only God retains the power of choice? Are the people of Israel being asked to accept that madness comes with the territory and that they are destined to a Sisyphean life of struggle to find God's way? Perhaps all God gives us is that red dot and the rest is up to us. Perhaps the story asks us to have faith in the wake of all these uncertainties and fears and in spite of cruel realities and bleak futures.

At times I confess that I could easily interpret the story as telling us that we are indeed already mad but have forgotten by choice or default that we are. As an educator and a Jew, however, I reject that view, as I have come to believe that our most important function is to resist despair and promote hope. I embrace the tradition that insists that it is a sin for a Jew to despair. I accept the wisdom of the red-dotted king in reminding us of our madness, for as upsetting as that acknowledgment might be, it can very well serve as the first step in the struggle for redemption.

In any case, my own work is constantly informed by the issues of the face-off between the forces of harsh reality and the dreams of liberating visions. There surely are compelling reasons to ground an educational program in the task of preparing people to grapple with the world as if it were inhabited with lunatics who occasionally aspire to be sane. I am, however, also attracted to the educational tradition that sees the world as if it were peopled by angels struggling to avoid being evil. I wind up in what I gather to be a characteristically Jewish position of embracing paradox and accepting uncertainty, but nonetheless still insisting on the necessity of human agency. This orientation is brilliantly encapsulated in Reinhold Niebuhr's succinct characterization of the moral significance of the Biblical Prophets as being rooted in their "confidence that life is good in spite of its evil and that it is evil in spite of its good. In such faith both sentimentality and despair are avoided."

The Rabbis and Their Sons

The son of an American rabbi delights his father by deciding that he wishes to follow in his father's footsteps and announces his intention not only to become a rabbi but to go to a yeshiva in Israel for his training. The father is overjoyed and pledges his total and unswerving support. The father's joy is to be short-lived, for just two years into his son's studies he receives a phone call from Israel in the middle of the night.

It is from his son who is in a very agitated state, his voice full of excitement and nervousness. The son has had an extraordinary epiphany and has converted to Christianity! He speaks of a newly found joyous sense of peace and fulfillment, yet is fearful of alienating his parents, yearns for his father's understanding, and begs for his blessing. The father is too shocked and bewildered to respond coherently and asks his son to allow him time to absorb the news.

The father is deeply shaken, racked with guilt, anger, sorrow, and apprehension. He prays, he anguishes with his wife, he reflects, he goes over any number of explanations and while this process helps, he is still tormented by doubt and pain. He says to himself, "I have been an observant and God-fearing Jew and raised my son to be the same, always believing in the goodness and mercy of the Almighty. What have I done to deserve this?"

He is also deeply embarrassed about his son's conversion, and his embarrassment prevents him from sharing his pain and getting help with his anguish. Finally, he summons up his courage and decides to confide in his closest friend, also a rabbi, for whom he has the greatest respect as a wise and pious person. He goes to the friend, tells him the story and asks, "How could it be that such a thing could happen to a pious and observant Jew like me?" The friend listens intently to the story, turns pale, clasps his hands to his face and gasps. He gathers himself together, gives out a long sigh, and answers, "Funny you should ask. I also have a son who likewise went to Israel to become a rabbi and he too became a Christian and I also was too ashamed to tell anyone."

The two friends sit in stunned silence, their pain deepened and their consternation now greatly magnified. When they speak it is with humility and near desperation that they look to each other for some explanation, some way to find meaning in their experiences. They both quickly come to the realization that in such difficult times, only a direct appeal to God Almighty will suffice. Knowing full well the dangers and risks of what they are doing and with great apprehension and reverence, they speak directly to God and beg for some divine inspiration or sign that would provide them with answers to their troubling and heart-breaking questions: "Oh God in heaven, we are two pious Jews who have faithfully and lovingly followed Thy will. We both have sons whom we sent to Israel to become rabbis, and both of them have forsaken their heritage and become Christians. Why did this happen?"

When they finish their prayers and beseechments, there is a hushed and tense silence. The two men, united by their parenthood, vocation, and pain, wait in a state of agitation and anxiety. Soon, there is a rustle in the room followed by the faint rumble of thunder and the appearance of a most pleasing glowing light. Then, much louder thunder and more powerful light, and the unmistakable sound of a voice being cleared. There is the sound of a long

sigh followed by a voice that says, "Funny you should ask. I also have a son whom I sent to Israel to become a rabbi and . . ."

Again there is pathos and pain, and again there is irony and mockery, with added dashes of fatalism, victimization, and loss of control. This is a story about good people in bewildered pain and about a God who knows all too well about human anguish. Yet we are left as unsure about His attitude toward it as we are about His ability to do anything about it. However, there are also in this story intimations of struggle, hope, yearning, and aspiration, all aspects of the quintessential human impulse to search for meaning and harmony in the universe and on earth. The story also references the peculiarly Jewish tradition of humans challenging God, insisting on the individual's right to question Him, demanding that God meet His covenantal responsibilities. In addition, the God in this story is not quite as remote and mysterious as other representations. Indeed, this God seems to empathize and even mirror human vulnerabilities. It is this kind of dialectic of divine inspiration and human responsibility that has prodded me to find ways to accommodate revelation, agency, and mystery in my work. To me a proper education needs to make space for the mystery and glory of moral and spiritual imagination, just as it needs to nurture the knowledge, skills, and insights that give those flights of imagination concrete expression.

There are other overtones that connect the story to me, namely the references to America and to Christianity. There is the obvious pride that the fathers feel about their sons' decision to emigrate to Israel, presumably a sign of more profound commitment than even that of rabbis in the Diaspora. At the same time, the fathers have remained in America presumably prospering and thriving so that they have the fruits of freedom, autonomy, and choice. The story reminds me that my life is also informed and shaped for better or worse by my American consciousness and my immersion in a Christian culture.

The connection to Christianity is indicative of the hesitance, ambiguity, and ambivalence that marks my own attitudes toward the tangled and tragic history of Jewish-Christian relations. I certainly bear the pains of anti-Semitism, ranging from the subtleties of innuendo and condescension to the raw experiences of violence and hatred. I share in the anger and bitterness directed at those who would harm and kill Jews in the name of a religion grounded in unconditional love. In addition, I have also suffered from experiencing the disdain and contempt that many Jews have for most Christians. Moreover, I have been drawn to the teachings of the historical Jesus that seem to resonate

and complement my notions of what constitutes Jewish ethics, namely a profound commitment to participating in the continuing creation of a world of peace, love, and justice. This affinity has produced significant disapproval over the years not only from my family but from some of my best Jewish friends fearful that I might become an apostate and give aid and comfort to the enemy. I am not at all pleased with this disapproval as it feels constricting and parochial, and it is in such times that I am likely to tell the story of the Mother and the Physicist.

Having said that, I also feel the poignancy of the sons' conversions, not only because of the disappointment for the parents but because the conversions represent a rupture in family tradition and, implicitly, a threat to Jewish survival. I very much value the continuity of family, tradition, and community that is so celebrated by Jews, and can therefore easily empathize with the fathers' anguish. Yet, I certainly very much value and honor modern notions of individual autonomy and choice, evidence of the powerful influences of Enlightenment thought on my life.

Hence, this ambivalence has both political and theoretical implications for me. Politically, it means that I must address the questions of identity; do I identify myself as unambiguously, if not partisanly, Jewish? Is my strategy toward dealing with Christians (as well as with other communities) to be one of competition, coexistence, or ecumenism? Is my strategy toward dealing with Jews on non-Jewish views to be one of mediator, translator, or apologist?

As a professional I need not only to figure out how these matters impinge on my teaching and writing, but I also need to address the compatibility of Jewish and Christian (as well as other) orientations, since my work is vitally concerned with the moral grounding of public education in a multicultural society. I continue to take the position that it is necessary and possible to forge some kind of vital consensus of what might constitute a spiritual and moral basis for an education directed at creating communities of peace, love, justice, and joy within the framework of a diverse and democratic American society. It would seem that this task is both a personal and a professional one in that I need to wrestle with the integration of the various strands that shape my own life as I engage in the larger political and ideological struggles for moral cohesion.

There are, of course, many other stories that are dear to me and many other interpretations of the ones I have told. However, I believe that what I have presented is indicative of much of my thinking on

these matters. Writing this essay has enabled me to clarify a number of issues but it has also left me riddled with lots of ambivalence and uncertainty. I find it especially difficult to sort out the effects of my Jewish background and experience from the other influences on my professional life but I have just about decided that this concern is both unanswerable ultimately more interesting than it is important. What I believe is more pertinent to this essay is the question of the degree to which I intentionally and systematically work to frame my professional life within a Jewish tradition.

There are a number of serious obstacles to this connection, not least of which is my inability and reluctance to identify with a particular Jewish tradition. In addition, there are the complicated political, cultural, and institutional problems involved with teaching in a public, secular, nonsectarian university established expressly for the purpose of serving a particular community and its diverse population. There is no question that I am drawn to certain traditions of Jewish learning and prayer that conjure up for me a very appealing fantasy of being in an interpretative community that requires and affirms serious study, reflection, debate, and meditation. However, this fantasy is different from the vision of Enlightenment academic life, for it involves study and dialogue in a shared discourse that is centered on questions of ultimate meaning, cultural practice, and social survival rather than the disparate, multidisciplinary, and poly-dimensional discourses involved in the metaphor of the free marketplace of ideas. I am strongly attracted to a life rooted in grounded study, dialogue, and reflection, but I can also be critical of such a life to the extent that it distracts us from the responsibility to act in and on the world and to the degree that it is enabled through the oppression of others (most notably, women). Still, study is sweet, and to study with a learned and wise companion is sweeter still, especially if the sweetness is an important ingredient in the making of larger meaning. This seems to be a Jewish teaching that is consonant with my professional identity, i.e., the faith that there are communal educational processes that actually do contribute to the creation of a just and loving community, and that function is, in fact, *the* most important purpose of education.

As a faculty member in a modern public university, my task involves working with students from a wide range of orientations and backgrounds. There are certainly intellectual and ideological connections that I share with my students, but they are broader, more procedural than substantive, and in any cases they are not about being

Jewish. Indeed, the discourse of my teaching emerges out of the traditions of Liberalism and the Enlightenment with their emphasis on individual expression, autonomy, openness, and free inquiry. I affirm and support this approach even as I wonder how it would be to study not within the flexible and forgiving framework of permissive liberalism but rather within the stricter parameters of Jewish traditions of study.

As a child of the Enlightenment and a product of American culture, I also find that some extremely important commitments of mine become somewhat problematic within the context of Jewish traditions. My being is in large part defined by commitments to totally inclusive democracy, radical equality, and unconditional love, which are in considerable tension with the hierarchy, sexism, racism, and violence that often permeates Jewish thought. I am frankly impatient with the labored efforts that it takes to find support for these commitments in the Torah, especially when there are other secular or non-Jewish sources where such affirmation is proudly and unequivocally presented.

However, let me quickly add that this ambivalence and hesitation, as real as it is, is incomplete, for I also have come to a place where I can clearly affirm myself as a Jew much beyond the point of doing so by default. What is clear to me is that I very much want to learn more about Jewish thought and experience and to deepen my still-evolving Jewish consciousness. More to the point, this affirmation has significantly manifested itself in my current teaching and writing.

Affirmation

I entered education in part because I believed that greater understanding and knowledge were the keys to making a better world. This notion expanded to the belief that critical rationality in the Socratic tradition of probing skepticism, careful analysis, and precise thinking is the ultimate weapon against prejudice, oppression, and authoritarianism. I still highly value these traditions. Indeed, my teaching style continues to emphasize tough questions that are intended to make students squirm a little and think a lot. (Never mind that the reverse often happens.) Although I have always felt some disquiet about this orientation, it took me a long time to understand that what was unsettling about it was it had no grounding except itself. It seemed to me that either the educators seriously interested in significant social reform were basically saying that it is good to think critically for its

own sake or that they were reluctant to be explicit about what they believe to be morally right. It finally dawned on me that what was utterly lacking not only in Education but in all of Academia was moral affirmation, a rather startling omission, particularly for those educators committed to creating a better world.

Again, it is Heschel who speaks to me:

"Socrates taught us that a life without thinking is not worth living. Now, thinking is a noble effort, but the finest thinking may end in futility. . . . The Bible taught us that life without commitment is not worth living; that thinking without roots will bear flowers but no fruit."

My professional work is totally concerned with grounding educational policies and practices not in critical thinking and not in creative expression but in moral commitments. To pursue critical thinking and creative expression for their own sakes is self-indulgent at best and idolatrous at worst. I certainly believe that these processes can be vital resources in the struggle to create a life of meaning but without a framework of meaning they are only neutral techniques capable of enabling good or evil. This makes the affirmation of a framework of meaning the prime requirement of any educational orientation worthy of serious consideration. Once I came to that conclusion, I had no choice but to make my own moral affirmations and framework of meaning as clear as possible, or to use a religious phrase, to profess my faith.

With all this said, I can now make it clearer how in at least two very important ways my Jewish experience is deeply embedded in my professional concerns. Firstly, I am dedicated to moral commitment and to meaning before anything else, before critical thinking, before creativity, before reading, before great literature and art, even before Einstein's theory of relativity. I see the value of education to the extent that it serves the good (I believe that this is what religious Jews call being obedient to God's will); anything else is a bonus. Notions of the good and of the meaningful should provide the criteria for determining the appropriateness of educational policies and practices and for measuring their efficacy. Such a position seems to me to be deeply Jewish since my view is that the most urgent and basic message of Torah is that in spite of a lot of contrary evidence we must operate in the faith that life has meaning, direction, and purpose.

Secondly, to paraphrase Will Herberg: My faith emerges from my affirmation of the history of the Jewish people as my redemptive history, and I have appropriated it as my personal background history,

making it the foundation of my existence. If this history is the foundation of my existence then it inevitably is the foundation of the work that serves to define me.

The stories I have told and discussed surely reveal that this faith is constantly being tested by complex and troubling issues, and that a great deal of uncertainty, ambivalence, and ambiguity remain. However, writers like Alasdair MacIntyre have helped me to accept this confusion and move on from there by pointing out the value of identifying with a particular moral tradition and community, as well as the danger, if not impossibility, of pursuing the moral life without such identification. What I find especially helpful is MacIntyre's characterization of a moral community as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument." MacIntyre goes on to say that a critical dimension of such a community involves participants arguing about what should constitute its moral commitments. I fully intend to continue participating in that historically extended, socially embodied argument and to integrate the moral commitments of that living tradition into my work with passion, care, and reverence. The nature of my involvement will probably continue to resemble that of a lover's quarrel, a process of loving affirmation and critical skepticism, occasioned no doubt with moments of indifference, even hostility. As an instance of how this process is going, I cite the following excerpt from a paper I recently wrote on the relationship between education and spirituality, in which I discuss issues related to my Jewish identity. Much of what I say reflects Jewish traditions but I also have to say that I would not be offended if some of it does not; however, I would greatly value critiques of it from any number of Jewish perspectives.

"I affirm traditions that not only recognize that humans are fated to create our world but believes that above all we are called upon to create a world resonant with divine intention—a world of peace, justice, love, community, and joy for all. These are traditions that accept as givens the potentials of human abilities as well as the limits of human fallibilities; they posit our capacity to be generous as well as to be selfish; to be angelic as well as demonic; compassionate as well as cruel; wise as well as foolish. Such traditions revere knowledge but only as it is tempered with the wisdom that advances justice and mercy; a perspective that acknowledges the enormity of the task but dismisses human despair as sinful; and one that represents a consciousness of outrage in the wake of cruelty and injustice but always in the faith that witness, confession, and healing offer the possibilities of transcen-

dence and redemption. What is absolutely crucial to redemption is human responsibility and human agency since these traditions require that we act as God's agents, dedicated to constructing and sustaining communities based on joy, love, peace, and justice."

Epilogue

As I expected, the process of writing this paper has clarified some issues, confused others, and raised brand-new ones for me. Perhaps the issues all come under the heading of the problematics of choice. I did not choose to be a Jew, I do not believe that I can choose not to be a Jew. I am absolutely clear that among other important things, I am a Jew, and I have no problems with any of this. As the adage says, one does not choose to be born or to die, or as George Santayana said, "No one speaks language, everyone speaks a particular language." Or, as the saying goes, everybody has to come from somewhere. Frankly, I don't know if it would be better if I could have chosen or what I would have chosen if I could, but in any case the issue is moot to me.

Of course, I have much more choice about how I express and manifest my Jewish identity, and the fact that I have such a lot of choice stems in large part from the happenstance of my living in twentieth-century America. As I navigate between the freedom and autonomy that comes with the territory of the Enlightenment American style and the commitments that come with the territory of Jewish traditions, I struggle with several questions. Is it OK for me to pick and choose the Jewish traditions that are appealing to me and resonant with my work? (I sort of think it is but I need some help with this.) Is it all right to see Jewish sources as, to use Roger Simon's term, fertile grazing areas for finding support for my ideas? Should I define myself as a Jew living in exile or as an American "who happens to be Jewish"? Should I become more attached to a particular Jewish tradition and work to deduce its relevance to American education? Is my work as an educator about encouraging *goyim* to be more Jewish or better informed on Jewish thought, or both, or neither? Perhaps I should accept and even embrace a life of multiple and shifting professional identities, moving from one paradigm and context to another. As a matter of fact, can I just give up fussing over these issues and forget all about this identity thing?

The most complicated question for me personally, however, has to do with my realization that, as with my connection to the Boston

Braves, my deepest and strongest ties are at base irrational. In a very real sense, these bonds have absolutely nothing to do with the content of Jewish history, nor its religious teachings, nor its literature, as much as I love and treasure them. I came to treasure them because I am Jewish; I did not become Jewish because I treasured them. I know this kind of visceral bonding resonates with the consciousness of the physicist's mother, but there it is and I remain very, very puzzled by it all. As far as my work is concerned, would it have had a similar orientation if I were born an Episcopalian? Or if I were a fourth-generation Jew? Or if I were an Israeli? I'm not even sure I need to know.

I end with even more questions than I had when I began, which reminds me of a story.

Two people, one a Jew, the other not, are having a long and heated conversation. One of them, in a moment of frustration, asks, "Why is it that every time I ask a Jew a question, they always answer with another question?" The Jew replies, "So what's wrong with asking questions?"