Blog Post: Are Jewish Studies Professors Jewish Educators?

By Benjamin M. Jacobs
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This guest post is by Benjamin M. Jacobs, who was a fellow of the Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies project. For another, complementary perspective on Jewish studies and Jewish education from this blog, see “An Underutilized Resource in Jewish Education?”

This is the first in an occasional series of posts by fellows of the Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies project.

When Aaron W. Hughes, a professor of Jewish studies at the University of Rochester, declared that “Jewish Studies Is Too Jewish,” a hullabaloo among Jewish studies professors ensued.

Some objected that Jewish studies has by now long been established in the academy as a scholarly, dispassionate, scientific pursuit on a par with all other disciplines and area studies, and has earned its rightful place on university campuses.

Others say that Jewish studies may be in some respects parochial, but then again, so are African-American studies, East Asian studies, and women’s studies, not to mention astrophysics, English literature, and constitutional law. What of it? Moreover, many Jewish studies professors go to great lengths to teach their subjects in a comparative frame, and many Jewish studies programs are paradigms of inter-disciplinarity, so all the better.

Unlike Hughes, I am not at all concerned with whether Jewish studies is “too Jewish.” Like many of my Jewish studies colleagues referenced above, I simply do not see this as a problem for Jewish studies, universities, or Jews. But rather than simply rejecting Hughes, I think there’s something worth talking about here. I am interested in when, how, why, and by whom Jewish studies professors might be considered Jewish educators.

An assumption I bring to this exploration is that teachers who teach subject matters that are in some way close to their hearts, inevitably wrestle with the question of where the personal and pedagogical meet. My first foray into this issue came years ago, when I followed Carmella, a high school Jewish history teacher, as she led a group of Jewish day school students on a week-long tour of historic Jewish sites in Poland. In my portrait of Carmella, I argued that her instructional methods, which often entailed what we might call emotional manipulation, were inherently wrapped up with her persona as the child of Holocaust
survivors and an ardent Zionist. Her approach, while problematic, was nonetheless masterful for what it was. And indeed, Carmella’s efforts were greatly appreciated by students, parents, administrators, and community members alike, most of whom embraced her mission and supported her work.

But surely professors are different from day school teachers like Carmella? After all, academic Jewish studies has spent the past half century trying to distance itself from accusations of parochialism and clannishness by producing critical, rigorous, detached scholarship while vowing not to address community concerns, such as Jewish identity and advocacy, head on.

And yet, something new and interesting has been happening in the field. At major research universities like NYU, Stanford, and the University of Michigan, important programs for the preparation of Jewish communal professionals have cropped up, with full participation of Jewish studies scholars. Jewish studies programs on the East Coast (Temple), West Coast (University of Washington), and many in between, have developed activities and initiatives to bring Jewish studies scholarship to the broader Jewish community.

Many of these developments in the Jewish studies academy have been couched in terms of “engagement,” a term that implies emotional attachment or commitment. But isn’t emotional attachment or commitment too Jewish, according to the Hugheses of the Jewish studies world?

Apparently not, at least in the view of some of my colleagues. In 2013-14, in a session of the Mandel Center project on Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies, I asked the group a series of questions about their professional/public personae (as professors of Jewish studies) and how they interact with their personal Jewish commitments. While each of the scholars had different ways of characterizing the intersection of these components of their identity, they were in general agreement that a division between the personal and professional did not really resonate with their experience. Most shied away from the notion of detachment altogether, saying it was neither possible nor potentially desirable, given present-day understandings of the role of subjectivity and, importantly, their impetus toward increased engagement of some sort. My colleagues are excellent and accomplished critical scholars, with little patience for apologetics or ethnic cheerleading. Still, several of them openly affirmed that their Jewish commitments in some way influence their work.

This group is not necessarily representative of a larger trend, of course. Still, within this group, traditional divisions between the public and private, or personal and pedagogical, seem to have become more permeable. Why? No doubt, the progressivist and postmodernist proclivities of today’s younger Jewish studies scholars (the PEJS participants are in their 40s), combined with the longstanding legitimacy of Jewish studies on American campuses in terms of scholarly rigor, university service, fundraising, and student matriculation, have made both the professors and the programs a bit more comfortable in their skins. But perhaps, as well, the time has come to stop fretting about Jewish studies being “too Jewish,” and to consider instead the potential of higher education as a central component of the broader Jewish education enterprise.
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