

HAYIDION

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Using Diversity: The Possibilities of Pluralism in Community Day Schools

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| Issue: Diversity

Diversity is a fact of Jewish life today. The radical openness of American society, where individuals craft their own identities based on choices they make for themselves, leads to – and celebrates – all sorts of hyphenated and hybridized identities. Marriages to non-Jews, inter-marriage and adoption mean Jews, who have never been monolithic, are multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial in ways not known before.

Consider the Jewish daughter of a Korean mother and WASP father who at the end of high school converts to Judaism – and, now married to a non-practicing Italian-American from a Catholic family – brings her child to a day school, or the self-proclaimed Wiccan whose Jewish parents send her to a Jewish high school, or the adopted daughter of a single Jewish/Buddhist parent or.... Driven perhaps by demographic worries, populations that were previously ignored by much of the Jewish community, such as Jews of color, inter-marrieds, single parent families, GLBT individuals and families, and others are now being acknowledged and courted by the leadership of the Jewish community. Whether they choose to acknowledge it or not, all Jewish educational institutions deal with different types of families and learners.

Community day schools represent an additional dimension of diversity, as well. Attracting families who range from secular to Orthodox in practice and/or belief, they operate without either a predetermined consensus about matters of educational practice or policies determined by one of the religious movements. Having accepted the mandate to educate all kinds of Jewish children every community day school faces basic questions: what does it do in the face of its diversity? Does it tacitly accept the Jewish community's patterns of minimizing meaningful discussions among Jews with very different approaches to Jewish life or go by the well-known "frummet common denominator" (i.e. the ritual practices of the most stringently traditional families?) Or does it challenge these patterns by presenting another model, one which is truly pluralist?

Approaches to Pluralism

Interested in pluralism, I have been studying Jewish schools that are not affiliated with any particular Jewish denominational movement. Some call themselves community, others non-denominational, trans-denominational or pluralistic. Whatever their names, they all must develop stances about what their diversity means and the extent to which it will be used for educational purposes.

I have found that at least three orientations to diversity characterize in these settings. The first, “demographic pluralism,” is the most limited. The school enrolls a diverse population and creates conditions in which most families will be comfortable. It doesn’t use the diversity to explore aspects of American Jewish life and Jews’ various patterns of religious belief and practice.

A second approach, “co-existence pluralism” attempts to use its diversity as an element of its educational program.” It actively seeks demographic diversity, and wants individuals and groups to learn to respect each other and the different ideas and ideologies represented. As a senior at a school I am studying put it, “I have learned the importance and necessity for tolerance. It is a message engrained in the very idea of [the school] --- a pluralistic day school tolerant of all forms of Jewish religious practice.”

A third approach that I am calling “generative pluralism” goes further. It incorporates the elements of demographic and co-existence pluralism but is based on the ability to hold and grapple with multiple, even contradictory interpretations and perspectives. It expects students to learn to articulate their own ideas, engage with others’ ideas, become more thoughtful and through this possibly change their own positions or together generate new approaches. As expressed by a twelfth grade student:

The Jews are a wandering people, both geographically itinerant and spiritually roving. A Jew can never stay in one state of mind for too long. We debate; we change our minds; we amend. [School] allowed me to change my opinions and alter my beliefs in an environment where I can gracefully cede even my strongest certainties to new ideas.

This approach to pluralism expects people to generate new personal and/or communal understandings and actions. Diversity becomes the grist for the pluralist mill.

Pluralism as Active Engagement with Diversity and Peoplehood

Community schools are uniquely positioned to prepare their students to embrace Jewish peoplehood. In an era when the Jewish world is factionalized and where barriers to joint efforts and new thinking abound, providing students with tools to define their own positions while also learning to understand and work with different sorts of Jews is vital to our collective future. How this is done will of course look different in elementary and secondary schools and will also be influenced by the particular characteristics of the school, its surroundings and stakeholders. There is no one way to “do” pluralism, though there are principles that guide practice.

Three principles of generative pluralism that I have seen in practice, each of which is rooted in the rabbinic and biblical traditions (but that is a subject for another article), are at the heart of the endeavor: (1) students need to know who they are and articulate this to themselves and others; (2)

they need to encounter people with different ideas and perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue with self-awareness and openness; and (3) they will be intellectually and emotionally prepared to further understanding and determine acceptable practice. Rather than imposing, however gently, the views of the dominant group while downplaying the needs of the others, processes are developed for people to explore different approaches with the expectation that the group will find acceptable solutions. In this kind of environment the school's policies and practices – from what content will be taught to the range of speakers and programs at assemblies -- are looked at through the lens of its commitment to, among other things, pluralism. With structures in place to allow people to look at what divides them in order to generate ways to work together, the school is building Jewish peoplehood.

This approach is as fitting for contemporary life in western society. A leading scholar of religious pluralism in American society, Diana Eck, puts it well: pluralism means “being committed to being at the table – with one's commitments.” Jewish day schools that take pluralism seriously cultivate this stance. Their students gain the tools to use their own commitments as they engage and work with others around issues of importance to the wider community.

Moving Beyond Diversity: What Can Be Done Now?

Immediate actions can be taken to support schools that want to use their diversity for educational purposes. These few ideas intended to start a conversation about steps to be taken.

On a School-wide Basis:

To be clear about its purposes, the school needs to consider how it relates to its religious (and other) diversity. A task force on pluralism might study the subject and look at the school: Where on the pluralism continuum does it now fall? Where does it want to be? How can it move in that direction?

On an Inter-school Basis:

Schools that are “doing pluralism” can be convened, whether through a series of conferences, a network (real or virtual), or some other means, to share what they have learned, strategies and methods they have developed and questions they face. Schools that want to deepen their commitment to pluralism can be paired with others to guide them.

On a National Basis

Teams of researchers and practitioners can document and disseminate effective practices, analyze problems, and investigate the effects of pluralism on students and families. In-depth studies of teachers, curricula and other programs can guide schools. Effective material can be gathered and shared.

Community day schools are uniquely poised to make a powerful contribution to *Klal Yisrael*. They can prepare a new generation to build solid bridges where few currently exist. Discussing the need to “make a *minyan*” at a pluralist day school, a student bases his comments on the traits of the biblical Aaron who both loved peace and pursued peace:

“Sometimes neither *minyán* would happen, and sometimes Egal[itarian] would compromise and go to *Mechitza*. However, the spirit in which these discussions took place shows the kind of pluralism that I experienced here. The purpose of these discussions was the pursuit of peace, because the goal was to help the *minyanim* coexist, and they were conducted with love for our fellow humans, because we were respecting each other’s needs and beliefs. This is how compromise and pluralism . . . works.” ♦

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Diversity

Diversity in day schools usually goes well beyond the denominational spectrum that falls under the rubric of pluralism. It includes socioeconomic disparities, gender and sexuality, color and ethnicity, and other differences of religious practice and customs. In this issue, authors recommend ways for day schools to become sensitive to a range of diversity, to welcome all students and teachers and find ways for them to validate these identities within the school community.