

## *The Ideal Educational Environments of an Amphibious Jew, Dr. Jeffrey Schein*

The intricate interplay of factors which make an experience “educational” is famously turned on its head in Dewey’s *Experience and Education* when Dewey entertains the possibilities that some experiences can be “mis-educative” (Dewey, 1938). By extension, the question of what educational environments are most educative presumes some criteria for differentiating between the relative efficacies of those environments.

This project is in many ways the story of a how a single insight about the efficacy of venues of education and acculturation—an epigram attributed to Adin Steinsaltz from a Jerusalem Shabbat afternoon shiur (Penzner, 1995)—has seeded thinking about the nature of potentially transformative educational environments by this practitioner–researcher over a 15-year period.

The intellectual foundations of the project sketched below will be linked to an opportunity the author has to work with the scholars of the Melton Center of Hebrew University to further strengthen the academic focus of his work in the fall of 2013. Following that visit the author will begin to rework the framework of the values of spiritual peoplehood (borrowed and adapted from the educational writings of Mordecai Kaplan) into a set of programs and curricula designed for 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish living. This process will be facilitated by constituting a group of Cleveland Jewish educators (colleagues and former students) as a think tank to read and critique drafts of chapters of the culminating volume which will appear in 2015. Several family foundations have expressed a willingness to support the final publication of the volume.

Linked to this notion of effective educational environments is a particular view of Jewish identity. Jewish identity is here viewed as complex, shifting and multiple (Horowitz, 2002).

The very notion that identity needs to be “problematized” (Beckerman and Rosenfeld, 2010) if it is to capture the ongoing life of a Jewish individual is embraced. To put this assumption about the fluidity of identity construction in the negative, the least useful way of exploring Jewish identity in this frame would be to assign it static and conventional denominational labels (Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Conservative, Orthodox, Neo-Hasidic, etc.). In the place of these labels the author attempts to play out the Steinsaltz contention that “all Jews need water” (Steinsaltz, 1995) in terms of marine, mammalian, and amphibious Jewish identities.

The author further assumes that American Jewish identity is deeply influenced by Mordecai Kaplan’s notion of peoplehood (Eisenstein and Kohn, 1952; Eisen, 1996; Scult, 2005) but that the notion of peoplehood can be limiting if it plays solely on the folk and ethnic dimensions of Jewish life (Liebman, 1970).

Within contemporary Reconstructionist thought, this project builds upon a critique of Kaplan’s notion of peoplehood and the substitution of “spiritual peoplehood” as a guiding principle for Jewish education. (Schein and Staub, 1984; Eisenstat and Schein, 2008). It also suggests that one feature of classical Reconstructionist thought—its emphasis on organic Jewish community (Kaplan 1934)—and one feature of contemporary Reconstructionist thought—the emphasis on values based decision making (Alpert and Staub, 2000) embody respectively the marine and mammalian poles of Jewish life suggested in Steinsaltz’s epigram.

This exploration unfolds in three stages:

- 1). The origins of the Steinsaltz epigram concerning marine and mammalian Jewish identity is explained and then fleshed out as a metaphor with potential heuristic power;

2). The metaphor is then applied as a tool for exploring three different dimensions of Jewish living and learning: *thinking Jewishly, programming for Jewish education, and planning for Jewish education;*

3). Returning to both Dewey and the Steinsaltz epigram, the author will explore some further e the epigram within the contemporary discourse of Jewish education, particularly the emphasis on experiential learning.

### *Steinsaltz Epigram Explained and Expanded*

Adin Steinsaltz noted Talmudist and scholar, observed in a Shabbat afternoon shiur on Jewish Identity the following: “All creatures live in water. The difference between sea creatures and land creatures is that land animals draw the water into themselves.” (Penzner, 1995)

Marine Jewish life is organic, flowing, and “natural”. The image of a fish happily swimming in the sea of water captures many aspects via a metaphor. Mammalian life is intentional and is marked by the constant search for the water (and other food sources) that will sustain the animal. When Jewish figures as diverse as Jeremiah and Akiva refer to Torah as the sustaining water (*mekor mayim chayim*) of Jewish life it is unclear whether they are imagining Jews in a marine or mammalian way.

This distinction between marine and mammalian Jewish life can be made concrete, however, through contrasting anecdotes from the lives of a contemporary colleague and a former teacher. The colleague made *aliyah* to Israel 14 years ago. In an educational video he made very clear his reasons for making *aliyah*. This rabbi was fatigued by what we might call the Herculean, mammalian efforts it took to sustain a Jewish life in North America. He found in Israel the marine currents where the natural rhythms of the nation supported his and his family’s Jewishness. A whole legion of Zionist thinkers (Hertzberg,1962) might be applauding as our

colleague's relishing of marine Judaism can easily be interpreted as one facet of Jewish "normalcy".

My teacher at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Rabbi Ludwig Nadelmann, on the other hand, was the incarnation of a principled Mammalian Jew. With a bit of ambivalence but a firm *yekke resolve*, he refused to spend time in Israel. He enjoyed doing everything with absolute kavana. He feared being in Israel would mean that his Jewishness was experienced in too casual and non-intentional fashion because being Jewish in Israel was—simply put—too easy. From his perspective, a happy Jewish fish is less interesting than an intentional (even if by his own admission somewhat neurotic) Jewish mammalian existence in the Diaspora

Below in the appendix the reader will find illustrations and language for the kinds of questions that flow out of these distinctions of identity.

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## *Appendix: Visual Images of the Creation of an Amphibious Jewish Identity*



What is Jewish life like when like the fish Judaism is the sea that surrounds us?



What is Jewish life like when like the bear we have to “hunt” for Jewish food, water, and sustenance?

## Our end goal is:



- A Jewish child, adult, or family for whom the rhythms of Jewish life and study have been experienced organically in immersive environments like camp, retreats, and ulpanim.
- One who can say in the immortal words of Annie Oakley “I’m doing what comes naturally.” (Happy and as unselfconscious as a fish swimming in water)

## Our end goal is:



- A Jewish child, adult, or family that has been supported and challenged to make decisions based on Jewish values.
- One who knows how to find Jewish (food) sources and chew on them.



The Creation of an Amphibious Jew