

Jon A. Levisohn

So if Judaism is an evolving civilization, then towards what set of beliefs and practices should we educate?

One option is to double down on essentialism. It may be true that Judaism is an evolving civilization, but surely there are some practices or texts that are at the core. Our educational efforts should focus on those.

However, if we take Kaplan seriously, this will not do. Every proposal for a transhistorical essence of Judaism fails. As an argument for promoting a particular practice or idea to students, we cannot simply affirm that lots of Jews in the past have enacted this practice or believed this idea.

We have to focus on the things that are distinctively suited to provide that autonomous capacity. What Jews ought to know, therefore, is whatever, in the current condition of the evolving civilization of Judaism, holds cultural value.

There is surely value to this approach, and I have advocated for a version of it myself elsewhere. But it now occurs to me that it is not yet fully Kaplanian. Metaphorically, we may be opening up the *beit midrash* to more people, but we are still assuming that the *beit midrash* and its texts are at the center of Jewish life. We are therefore not yet fully embracing the diversity of Jewish civilization.

A more radical option, then, is to proliferate the languages of Judaism beyond the textual. But unlike the second option above, we have to do so in a way that embraces the challenge of normativity. What, then, is the normative criterion? What should Jews know? The criterion is the future, i.e., the future health and vitality of the Jewish community. Kaplan calls on us to notice the evolution of Jewish civilization, but not to be mere observers. Jews should know whatever they need to know to be contributors to Jewish civilization and producers of Jewish culture. As educators as well as participants, we have to take responsibility for that evolution. [Read more...](#)

Miriam Heller Stern

Kaplan defined creativity as “the result of whole-souled and organic reaction to life’s values; and a reaction in which senses, emotions, imagination, intelligence and will are fully aroused” This view is mirrored in contemporary research in the field of affective neuroscience that suggests that the cognitive and affective processes of the brain are naturally co-dependent and integrated. The ability to engage in “whole-souled” thinking about our values and surroundings is essential if we are to participate meaningfully in the ongoing process of creation itself. Through this type of deep, holistic engagement we can focus on becoming better humans and improving society each day...

By recasting the discourse around thinking instead of knowing, we transcend a conventional conception of Jewish “knowing” that is limited to accumulating a body of knowledge or literacy. While wisdom is at the core, creative thinking demands habits of generativity, ingenuity, interpretation, resilience, and empathy. It is not meant to be a lonely or competitive enterprise; the fate of the Jewish people relies on collaboration, combining talents and thinking together, as a community.

We cannot take for granted that progress is linear, that societies will become stable or predictable, or that existential threats to Jews, Judaism and humanity – be they internal or external – are only a theme of history. Our systems for perpetuating Jewish literacy – namely the enterprise of Jewish education – must take seriously Kaplan’s charge that we center creativity as an aspiration.

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Kaplan was fond of the phrase a Copernican Revolution and used it in several different contexts. When one’s understanding of Judaism shifts from that of a religion to a culture or religious civilization does one understanding of who is an educated Jew correspondingly shift? If so, how?

Arthur Green

Who is an educated Jew?” The question seems so deceptively simple. In earlier eras, it did seem to have a simple answer. One who could swim skillfully in yam ha-talmud, the “sea” of the Talmud, or of traditional Jewish learning as a whole, in the original Hebrew and Aramaic of the sources, was considered a knowledgeable Jew. But today that is patently inadequate as a definition. How much does one need to know about the Holocaust? About Israeli popular music? About Yiddish literature? The history of Zion-

ism? American Jewish cooking? None of those vital parts of Jewish existence – and many more like them – fit into the old categories.

Jewish education, then, is about being shaped by the Jewish experience. This includes life and schooling in an intensely Jewish community. That is one where Jewish teachings, values, patterns of living, ethnic concerns, languages, and so forth are the stuff of daily living. I can picture such cultivation in a Chabad setting in Los Angeles, on a secular kibbutz that has introduced more Judaism in ‘Emek Yizre’el, and various places in between. In a secularized context, it is easier to picture in Mexico City or Paris than in the US, where the assimilatory pressures are strongest and the choices of identity popular among the youth are least shaped (for those of fair complexion) by ethnic origins. [Read more...](#)