Asking the Right Questions

JONATHAN WOOCHER

Jews are famous (notorious?) for our love of questions (including answering questions with questions). One could argue, in fact, that our faith is built around a set of ancient questions, both simple and profound, that resonate throughout time: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9); “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9); “Will not the judge of all the earth do justly?” (Genesis 18:25); “What is your name?” (Genesis 32:28).

Questions are at the heart of all Jewish learning, and which questions we seek to answer makes all the difference in the impact that learning will have. Although there are two sets of questions that Jewish education must try to answer today, in much of our teaching, one set dominates. The questions our curricula often focus on ask about how to be “Jewish” — how to celebrate holidays, how to pray in synagogue, how to read Hebrew, how to be a good Jewish citizen. These are important questions, but not the only ones that Jewish learning should be raising and responding to. By restoring a second set of questions — the questions that David Moss poses in his essay, questions that lie at the heart of our tradition — to a place of prominence in our educational thinking and practice, Jewish education becomes about more than just developing “good Jews.” It becomes a vehicle for helping us to become the “images of God” we are meant to be.

I know the dichotomy I have drawn is too stark. Every Jewish educational institution seeks to impact the lives of its students, to help them be better human beings by being better Jews. But a large proportion of students leave our educational programs without the sense that Judaism has important messages for their...

Flexible and dynamic at the fingertips of the sages in their study houses. And yet these same characters sometimes appear flat and static during our own attempts at learning. Who among us has not asked, “Where am I in the text? What are the letters trying to say to me? Why am I so incapable of understanding this ancient wisdom?”

We need a teacher to help us spend time with the words differently — a master to set before us the 22 otiot of the alef-bet so we see these jewels shining anew. Rather than making it easier or reducing it to some flimsier form of its superb greatness, a gifted teacher will help us to refresh the Torah’s meaning; we need to create access to Jewish knowledge from a new perspective.

In Jerusalem, the opportunities for locating such a guide or teacher are many. Such teachers sit at tables and stand at shtetlers behind hundreds of stone-walled classrooms, under arches, up creaky stairs, and around corners. They sit in small offices located over bookstores. Sipping sweet, muddy coffee in a cafe that, despite its dingy decor, serves up amazing cheese bourekas, these teachers offer a fresh look at the letters laid out in a stack of opened books on a table by the window. This city is to the seeker of Jewish meaning Judaism’s version of author J.K. Rowling’s magical Diagon Alley, a cobbled street of wizardly wonders hidden from those who are not looking, or who don’t know where to find head-spinning interpretations of Jewish being. Along one stone corridor is David Moss’s studio, which is filled with such magic. There, the letters dance at the hand of a master educator, a teacher-artist, a spell-binding tinkerer. Moss has a rare ability to fashion letters that adhere to the depths of Jewish tradition and also enable a bereft student to re-imagine his or her personal connection to our “turn it and turn it” tradition.

On a desert-hot Jerusalem afternoon, I wandered into this crowded studio, not necessarily seeking but expecting inspiration. I never know what Moss will pull from his stack of mysteriously labeled pizza boxes that store exquisite dreams. On that sweltering day, he shared a well-crafted cardboard vision of the multidimensional Jew, a wooden figurine held up in the center of an intricate map of Jewish being; there was the self (you, me, us), surrounded by a world of Jewish ideas and words organized around essential questions. Mesmerized and moved, I acquired a colorful, wildly conceived fine art print of this map-of-Jewish-being that paints these questions in bright shades. It is a placeholder until I return to the life-size place — a destination in which to explore the sacred Jewish letters of obligation that live around, within, behind, above, and ahead of me. It is a walk through an entirely different kind of text study that invites students to engage in a uniquely conceived conversation at the center of a garden, starting from the bet of breishiet, another beginning.
Mapping the Multidimensional Jew

BETH COUSENS

In 1967, in the essay “The Good Jew in Lakeville,” the sociologists of American Jewry Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum published a scale, a list of Jewish behaviors, that they used to discern what was or was not essential to “good” Jewishness. Kashrut, Israel, and synagogue membership each made the list, as did knowledge of Jewish “fundamentals,” history and culture, and items related to Jewish pride. Of the 22 items on the list, seven were not distinctively Jewish behaviors, and each of these seven was an action we might consider to be associated with social justice. The list, then, was overwhelmingly behavioral and dictated by traditional Jewish ideas or Jewish values or both. Demographers and sociologists continue to use similar scales to assess Jewishness, and even when sociologists use other scales to measure “Jewishness,” they continue to emphasize specific and concrete behavioral and attitudinal Jewish markers — for example, adding the importance of Jewish friendships or of raising Jewish children.

These scales are useful when assessing specific, typical Jewish behaviors. But what if one does not observe kashrut and yet limits consumption, framing this behavior in Jewish language? What if one feels simultaneously a sense of home and exile when in Jewish spaces? How might these complicated — perhaps contradictory — behaviors be evaluated by such a scale? In the past year, in a focus-group setting, I shared

The question is whether such an education is adequate and appropriate today, when Jews are more likely to ask what identifying as a Jew means for the larger framing of their lives. This is why the questions Moss asks must become central to the strategies and implementation of Jewish education.

A growing number of Jewish educators today rightly speak about the need to educate the “whole person,” not just the “Jewish” part of who we are. (For an introduction to whole-person learning in a Jewish context, see jesna.org/main.) Educating the whole-person means embracing the kind of “new Jewish learning” that philosopher Franz Rosenzweig argued for nearly a century ago, a Jewish learning for which nothing in life is foreign and everything can be wrestled with through the lens of Torah. Increasingly, Jewish educators today are focusing on students’ socio-emotional needs and on how their gender identities intersect with their Jewish growth. They are also focusing on what Judaism has to say about our natural world and our charge to tend it, about work and workers and how to treat them fairly, and about our deepest spiritual longings and how to satisfy them. These educators are blazing a pathway for 21st-century Jewish learning that holds enormous promise because it is asking the right questions. And, if we start with the right questions, good answers — answers to be discussed, debated, argued over, and, ultimately, embodied in our lives — are sure to follow.

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