

## Adventures in Pluralism, Part 2: Jewish Education Beyond Denominational Boundaries

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In [Adventures in Pluralism, Part 1](#), we found that issues of Jewish conversion and Jewish peoplehood in Israeli governmental context seemed to be immune to pluralism, because there are well-populated positions on the Jewish denominational spectrum from whose perspective the application of pluralist concepts to these issues would be impossible -- that is to say, to acquiesce to pluralism would constitute an abandonment of these positions on the spectrum.

Yet there are other pluralistic activities, taking place across Jewish denominational divides, which appear to be more successful. Many of these are educational institutions, from yeshivot like Jerusalem's [Pardes](#), to community day schools like New York's [Heschel school](#).

It is easy to see why education might be the ideal setting for pluralism. After all, education seeks knowledge, and knowledge can be separated from values and judgements. To know something is not to endorse something, and so people with divergent values can learn together, even if they disagree about what they are learning. Writing in [the summer 2005 issue of \*Contact: the Journal of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundarion\*](#), Rabbi Arthur Green quotes Rabbi David Hartman on the potential for pluralist, trans-denominational Jewish learning: "As long as we are learning, we can all be together. As soon as we start *davening*, we go off into separate rooms." This quote comes from R' Green's article about the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, "the first full-time, trans-denominational Rabbinical school in Jewish history", of which he is Rector. "Rabbis will be better trained for having sat in classes alongside others who disagree with them on almost every issue imaginable," writes R' Green. "How better to sharpen your understanding, to hone your own point of view, than by looking at the sources in a mixed group, where opinions and readings diverge across a wide spectrum?"

[The same issue of \*Contact\*](#) contains an article by Dr. Bruce Powell, Head of School at the New Community Jewish High School in greater Los Angeles, on the success of the community day school model. "[C]ommunity schools are about ideas," writes Powell, "not ideology. They are about an honest and open dialogue on Jewish practice, philosophy and history... [W]hereas denominational schools might mandate a particular mode of prayer, a community school... might offer multiple minyan options where students can explore a plurality of spiritual modalities."

But is pluralism in education really so picture-perfect? How far apart can learning and values be pulled before one or the other is weakened? **To their credit, both R' Green and Powell acknowledge that education, especially in a religious context, involves values as much as ideas.** Both also describe approaches for meeting these challenges. R' Green writes:

Don't rabbis have to *stand* for something...? And doesn't that mean that my viewpoint is right and yours is wrong?... Yes, a program of rabbinic studies does have to stand for something, and we clearly do. *Ahavat Torah*, the love of wisdom and the pursuit of Jewish learning, is the hallmark of our

program. We find that it brings us together, even as we argue over the meaning of a passage... [T]here are two more areas where denominational differences have little place. One is in the growth and development of spiritual life... The same is true for activism. There is little difference between Jews when it comes to what are called *mitzvot beyn adam le-havero*, the good deeds we do toward our fellow humans. We all believe in reaching out to the poor, the sick and the needy. We care about the elderly and the disabled, and want to help.... Learning, spiritual work and human kindness. (Might one call them *Torah, Avodah* and *Gemilut Hasadim*?) These are areas where our rabbinical students, for all their diverse viewpoints, can work together and build a single Jewish community.

Powell writes:

Creating a non-denominational school is rife with challenge. Among the first questions we must ask ourselves is, "Upon what do we agree?" Creating a single track for prayer is hopeless; setting standard policies for the wearing of kippot, Shabbat observance, kashruth, student attire and modesty, and holiday celebrations stretches the notion of inclusivity often to a point of vagueness and uselessness. Board agreement on admission policies, especially regarding "who is a Jew" and whether or not non-Jews (whoever they may be) ought be admitted, breeds tension, at best, and dissolution in the worst cases... [T]he greatest advantage of a Jewish community school is also its greatest challenge: how to avoid trying to be everything to all and ending up with nothing — no strong views, weak knowledge base, vagueness of purpose and mission, blandness of identity, and graduates without a place to go...

The community school faces a tough order. It needs to establish clear goals and missions across a broad fabric. It needs to have a sharp and clear identity without alienating its constituents, yet be true to its pluralistic macro purpose. It needs to create trans-denominational Jews who are comfortable in their own Jewish skins and who can move with comfort and competence throughout the rich diversity of Jewish secular and denominational life. This Jewish community school challenge is, from my view, the single most invigorating and transformational moment in recent Jewish memory. It forces those of us dedicated to this awesome business of "touching the future" to once again become "God wrestlers," grapplers, idea entrepreneurs. It causes us all to sharpen our visions, to ask if and how we ought to disturb the universe.

Both authors acknowledge, then, that Jewish education requires the articulation and promulgation of values. Interestingly, though, **both also write that the way for a pluralist Jewish educational institution to meet this challenge involves the creation of something new -- in R' Green's words, to "build a single Jewish community," and in Powell's words, "to create trans-denominational Jews".**

And this begs the question: **if something new is being created, then is this model really a pluralistic cooperation between groups, or is it simply the creation of a new group?**

Creating a new group does not require the dissolution or abandonment of the old denominations, nor the establishment of a new one. Rather, it means drawing a new line, a line that cuts across denominations, between those for whom denominational differences exist, but can be surmounted, and those for whom denominational differences are so great, and so important, that they make cooperation impossible. Those "inside the line", no matter to what denomination they belong, are members of the new group.

The mechanism used to draw this line is self-selection. Only rabbinical students who already believe in this pluralist form of learning and community will choose to enroll in Hebrew College's rabbinical program. Only families who believe in (or at least, do not object to) this kind of pluralism will enroll their children in community day schools. This element of self-selection is critical in explaining why these institutions are so conducive to pluralism while issues of peoplehood and conversion in context of Israeli policy are not: the group of Jews who wants to be involved with the state of Israel is much broader than the group that believes in pluralistic approaches to these issues. **In other words, pluralism is only more "successful" in these educational contexts than in the Israeli conversion context because self-selection excludes the group for whom pluralism is impossible.**

This kind of pluralism really does bridge divides between groups to some degree. But it also exposes pre-existing divisions within groups, and creates a layer of new groupings which overlaps the old.