"From Strength to Strength" Dewey and Religious Jewish Education

Michael Rosenak

The philosophy of John Dewey, after many years of semi-eclipse, is again the subject of heightened scholarly interest. This is not surprising, for Dewey's thought is rich and invites diverse interpretations and applications. Also, of course, it has been the focus of a major and often (at least theoretically) dominant orientation in education. This orientation is predicated on the widely respected belief that good education, like philosophy itself, arise out of the concrete experiences and problems of society rather than ideas and ideals allegedly "hovering" above it. It envisions an educated person as one who understands that life consists largely of problems that must be recognized and identified in order to be competently addressed and, wherever possible, satisfactorily resolved.

Clearly, this experiential approach runs counter to the classicist orientation that has been its bitter and aristocratic opponent throughout the century. The latter conceives of education as initiation into received verities, as an enterprise designed to lead learners to the truths of heritage and culture and responsible to the philosophical mentors of the age.

To indicate what the conflict between the two schools of thought is all about, we may compare two short statements, by John Dewey and John H. Hutchins, respectively. Dewey, in *How We Think*,[1] suggests the following metaphor:

> A man traveling in an unfamiliar region comes to a branching of the road. Having no sure knowledge to fall back upon, he is brought to a standstill of hesitation and suspense. Which road is right? And how shall his perplexity be resolved? There are but two alternatives: he must either blindly and arbitrarily take his course, trusting to luck for the outcome, or he must discover

> grounds for the conclusion that a given road is right.

Here, at the branching of the road, in a new situation, only intelligent inquiry comes to the rescue: no traditional or received truth, even if held to be revealed or otherwise perennial, holds the key to understanding and consequent decision-making. Hutchins in *The Conflict of Education in a Democratic Society*,[2] says the following:

> The prime object of education is to know what is good for man. It is to know the goods in their order. There is a hierarchy of values. The task of education is to help us understand it, establish it, and live by it.

No prosaic problem-solving here! Action is determined by "what is good for man," by true values, properly understood and prioritized as taught by (generally Aristotelian) philosophers. In the latter orientation, religious tradition is to be solemnly appreciated, perhaps even revered or endorsed. In the former, religion is at best and *at its best*, an openness to experience, a kind of sensibility that frowns on the doctrines of established religions and turns it back on the supernatural gods who allegedly thwart human freedom and development.

Dewey and Religious Jewish Education

On the face of it, nothing seems further removed from religiously oriented Jewish education, with its emphasis on sacred texts, and initiation into the historical and religious consciousness of the Jewish people than all that! The centrality of text in Jewish education is founded on the assumption that the sacred books of Judaism contain universal and immutable truths whose source is "supernatural," and whose authority is, by definition, based on more than the experience of any given believer.

Dewey unequivocally rejects such notions. His scorn for the certainties of religious "dogma" is categorical. In *The Quest for Certainty*,[3] he criticizes traditional habits of valuation that, to his regret, are still with us.

> At present, the arbiters (of what is valued as good) is found in the past, although there are many ways of interpreting what in the past is authoritative. Nominally, the most influential conception is that of a revelation once had or a perfect life once lived. Reliance upon precedent, upon institutions created in the past, especially in law, upon rules of morals that have come to us through unexamined customs, upon uncriticized tradition, are other forms of dependence...

Dewey does not suggest a simple break with the past. That would create "chaos"; in any case, human beings are too conservative in temperament for such policies. Rather, "What is needed is...(an) intelligent examination of the consequences that are actually effected by inherited institutions and customs, in order that there may be intelligent consideration of the ways in which they are to be intentionally modified on behalf of [the] generation of different consequences.

What, if anything, can contemporary Jewish educators whose orientation is traditional or even explicitly religious, learn from the iconoclastic Dewey? In briefly examining this question, we must seek to more clearly understand what Dewey sees as central for education and the educated society. We must also ask why, given Dewey's apparent irreligion, so many Jewish educators who view Judaism as a religious civilization looked to him as a teacher guide.

If education is largely about teaching young people to richly experience and to wisely "generate" desirable consequences of experience, they must learn how to think effectively and "intelligently." In the first instance they must learn what occasions and spurs thinking.

Dewey posits that constructive thought arises in situations when some "situation of security" that seemed to be working well, stops functioning satisfactorily. The resulting situation is experienced as problematic: as one of unease and ambiguity; there is "perplexity, confusion, doubt." We cannot initially

know what the new situation means. What went wrong? This feeling of confusion and doubt ("What went wrong?") we transform, as intelligent beings, into a problem to be solved, a doubt to be worked through.[4] Only if we think well to discover what the actual problem is, can we move towards a solution. Says Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy:*

> ...a problem well put is half-solved. To find out what the problem and problems are which a problematic situation presents to be inquired into, is to be well along in inquiry. To mistake the problem involved is to cause subsequent inquiry to be irrelevant or to go astray [5]

Being well-educated, then, is reflected in one's knowing how to negotiate this road: from unease, through inquiry, to plausible solution. Here the habits of tradition appear pernicious. Can previous principles and "standards" help us in this negotiation? Are they not as likely to divert and blind us as to guide us? Is not obedience to old laws an irrational attachment to the solutions of yesteryear, worked out in response to long forgotten problems?

These questions are meant to be rhetorical and we are expected to reply to each of them in the affirmative. But if we do so, have we not undermined all traditional Jewish education?

Reconstructing Jewish Life

Yet we find, in the early decades of the twentieth century especially, but continuing into the fifties, a great interest in Dewey and even discipleship among prominent American Jewish educators.[6] This was certainly based partially on Dewey's pluralistic approach to society and democracy, which made beneficent room, at least transitionally, for minorities and their cultures. I believe, however, that it was mainly because Dewey, though often defined as a humanistic atheist, actually legitimated what we may call a soft religious approach, focused on sensibility rather than doctrine. In his words:

> There is a conceit fostered by perversion of religion which assimilates the universe to our personal desires; but there is also a conceit of carrying the load of the universe from which religion liberates us. Within the flickering inconsequential acts of separate selves dwells a sense of the whole which claims and dignifies them. In its presence we put off mortality and live in the universal. The life of the community in which we live and have our being is the fit symbol of this relationship. The acts in which we express our perception of the ties which bind us to others are its only rites and ceremonies.[7]

Here, then, "there is a kind of religiosity and also, a dignified status for "there is a kind of religiosity and also, a dignified status" for community in which we live and have our being." Here, problems and their intelligent resolution are not presented as threats to the life of the community and the individual, but as the stuff of their existence, as the basis of constructive communal thinking and action.

In the New York Bureau of Education and the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary in the early years of the century we come upon a group of educators who, in the jargon of chroniclers of the American Jewish experience, are sometimes called "Benderly's boys"[8] for they worked under the direction of Samson Benderly at the (New York) Bureau. All of them wrote doctoral dissertations at Columbia University's Teachers College where Dewey taught. All of them looked to Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, for Jewish leadership. Kaplan was himself much indebted to Dewey for his patterns of sociological and theological thought, and the careful reader of his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*[9] will see that he develops his thesis systematically in the Deweyian mode. He moves from the problematic situation of American Jewish life, namely, the unprecedented ill-ease of Jews with their Jewishness, to a location of the problem, the inability of contemporary movements to successfully locate the problem of modern

Jewish life due to encumbered (either supernatural or disembodied universalistic-humanistic) conceptions of Judaism. From there he moves to his "reconstructionist" solution.

The Benderly group too sought to deal with the problematic situation created by the tension that was developing in the American Jewish experience. They wished to negotiate the dilemma of how to live in a free society that mobilized their energies and attracted their love, while, at the same time, desiring to maintain the Jewish heritage. Following Kaplan, they identified the problem with the irrelevance of previous understanding of the purpose of Jewish life and found solutions in a new Deweyian conception of Jewish education which, while not forsaking Jewish folkways and culture, the products of Jewish experience, placed the child and his or her development within both American and Jewish "civilization" in a central position.[10]

The soft religiosity that Dewey explicated and endorsed in his book, particularly in his *A Common Faith*,[11] also solved a problem: how could the internal language, of God and Torah, be maintained when the Orthodox beliefs of the past no longer spoke with authority to educators who yet saw themselves charged with teaching this internal language? Here too Dewey provided an American philosophical hinterland to the teaching of Kaplan: authentic religious feelings had to do with experienced social loyalties and the experience of human potential rather than with metaphysically-rooted doctrines. If we keep in mind that Mordecai Kaplan considered religion primarily a group affair, articulating the ideas, cultural patterns, needs and interests of the people, the following sentiment of Dewey and Tufts, in their *Ethics*, obviously made sense to the Benderly group. The authors state that the standards for what we may call moral behavior in primitive societies

> are group standards rather than of individual conscience; they operate largely through habit rather than through choice. Nevertheless, they are not set for the individual by outsiders. They are set by a

group of which he is a member (emphasis his).

Every member, therefore, practices certain acts, stands in certain relations, and maintains certain attitudes, "just because he is one of the group which does these things and maintains these standards."[12] Even in modern times, which have given rise to individual conscience and desire, the essential social foundations of morality remain: there is still "the constant discovery, formation or reformation of the self in the ends which an individual is called upon to sustain and develop by virtue of his membership in a social whole.[13] And behind them, is the soft religiosity of consciousness and conscience, of belonging in the world through community, and the dignity of universal striving and achievement. The contemporary Bible scholar, Yochanan Muffs has well expressed an appreciation of Dewey's soft religiosity against "all militant atheists" while criticizing his broadside against "supernaturalism."

> ... even if one wishes not to talk about God and religion, it is still legitimate and even necessary to talk about the religious elements of experience. Such religious elements do have an objective reality no matter how we explain them metaphysically...Moments of heightened self-awareness and 'oneness' with the world do have a 'religious' quality about them. States of creative tension between ideals imaginatively projected and the here-and-now of the world - states of mind in which one's humanity is explosively expanded - are not unrelated to that reality symbolized by the word God.[14]

Wear Tzitzit!

The decline of Dewey's influence can be attributed to three factors: cultural, theological and historical, respectively. Though all of them have general as well as specifically Jewish ramifications, we shall speak of the first two in a specifically Jewish context.

(a) Culturally, it became increasingly clear that the overwhelming strength of the "larger" American-Western culture put the Jewish one in the shadow and that, if the Jewish "civilization" was not positioned nearer to center stage, it would fade away. In other (Deweyian) words, it would cease to set any standards at all, and cease utterly to motivate conscience. It would find itself bereft of all authority over the individual to form and re-form his or her self. That much-lauded institution of Americanization, the public school, to which Benderly and his colleagues were unswervingly loyal, made gentlemen out of Jews but the result was not usually the "generation" of Jewish gentlemen.

Mordecai Kaplan himself seems to have become soberly aware of this: a former student of mine who wished to study with the old teacher-scholar while Kaplan, then in his nineties, was in Jerusalem, told me that when he approached him with his request, Kaplan agreed to teach him - every day! But he made what the student understood to be a condition: "Wear *Tzitzit*!" (He did - and does.)

(b) Theologically, the soft religiosity, of "A sense of the whole" in isolation from more normative features of faith, was found to be especially undermining for the Jewish community. This community discovered, in Peter Berger's terms,[15] that its cultural negotiation with the majority culture was leading it into cognitive surrender, that the give and take of "two civilizations" was almost all, from a Jewish vantage point, "give." Soft religiosity easily turned into irreligious humanism. That was, in a sense, what Dewey had recommended. He wanted people to realize that you don't need a particular "institutional" religion to have spiritual or even religious sensitivity. Yet realization seemed to arrive with disconcerting speed for Jews. Jews, after all, were both a small minority which made them vulnerable and they were traditionally

> imbued with universal sentiments which, for two hundred years and more, had supplied them with ideological grounds for vanishing into a enlightened humanity, ostensibly marching into a messianic age.

And so: the first factor, the cultural and social pull of the majority, weakened and reduced the Jewish groups; the second, soft religiosity, diluted the life of Jewish tradition and extinguished the flame of Jewish faith.

Finally, as far beyond the parameters of the Jewish community, the optimistic rationalism of Dewy, though overstated and even caricatured by his opponents, seemed unable to cope with World War II and the cold war. Education became pre-occupied with material success and "making it" rather than with Dewey's "growth," with Sputniks and technological progress. And then, largely in repugnance with all that, there was a renaissance of Great Books, with perennial truths and values that have preceded us and will ostensibly outlive us.

The revival of interest in Dewey speaks to a general concern that perennialism is too snobbish and that it is an escape from educational realities.[16] On the other side of the spectrum is the concern that too many people are learning too little. While they are enveloped in "experience," their experience is shallow and often destructive, for it is not being wisely channeled by teachers in the direction of "growth," as Dewey insisted it should be.[17]

This revival may speak to concerns within the Jewish world as well. We see all around us that something is not working right. After the Holocaust, in the midst of demographic diminishment and an increasing inability of Jews and Jewish groups to communicate with one another and with our tradition, we are clearly in a state of ambiguity and doubt, at a "branching of the road." Most disturbing to religious Jews like myself: it turns out that being normative, text-centered and loyal to truths-beyond-experience seems to be no water-tight dike against the floods of irrelevance and insensitivity in

our contemporary situation. Those who are most normative, most centered on "learning" and most faithful seem at times least likely to identify problems and to address them in a manner that reflects consideration of the contemporary experience, a consideration that could mobilize, towards their solutions, spiritual energies within the Jewish people.

So much for the perceived problematic situation of unease and anxiety. As for moving towards the identification of the problem itself, it clearly involves three unprecedented phenomena: the Holocaust, the State of Israel and the unlimited freedom and pervasive secularism within which contemporary Diaspora communities live.

Can these problems be properly identified and can we move towards their resolution? Can frameworks be created for the kind of deliberations Dewey saw as essential to intelligent resolution of problems without adopting his polemical opposition to religious truths that claim the right to authoritatively form and inform experience? Can there be new theology after the Holocaust that at least takes account of it and is sensitive to it? Can there be new *halachic* thinking that takes Jewish sovereignty and responsibility with all their challenges and nova into account in the life of covenant? Can there be religiously plausible models for relationships between JEWS AND Gentiles that separate them while maintaining their fraternal bonds in the framework of democratic commonwealths? And the over-riding issue: Can genuine faith, commitment and commandment, live together with authentic deliberation and the ability to deal with perplexity and problems? What kinds of education people will be cultivated in an education that takes seriously both the Transcendent and the mundanely experiential, the perennial and the problematic, in the lives of communities and of individuals?

Going Towards Peace

Despite the reservations we have noted, there are two cogent reasons for religious Jewish educators to take a fresh look at

Dewey. The first reason is that we are looking for teaching models to be used in developing and transmitting the talent to recognize problems in contemporary Jewish life. We wish to cultivate an ability to deal with them and to see in their discovery and management a sign of vitality and even deep satisfaction. At the same time, we wish to distinguish between problems that arise out of immediate experience and those aspects of culture and spirit that are above and beyond the child's experience but yet can define his or her life in the deepest strata of significance.[18] Secondly, we wish to translate the religious tradition as it was articulated in different cultural and historical circumstances into categories that speak to contemporary conditions and sensibilities yet to do so without "cognitive surrender" to contemporary secular culture. This requires, I have argued elsewhere, balancing the normative and collective tradition (the "explicit religion") of Judaism with the insight, spontaneity, individuality and humanistic universality of what I term "implicit religiosity."[19]

Operatively, this means that we must translate our tradition into the idiom of our time so that it may be understood by learners, but we must do so only partially, without social-scientific or philosophical reductionism. Hence we should avoid such ploys as: When our ancestors said so and so, they meant so and so (for example, when they said God, they really meant human potential. What we require are not reductionistic explanations of what our tradition "really meant" but rather new *midrashim*, new ways of looking at things that help us to "mean" in our lives and in our communities through the prism of Torah. New midrashim, or for that matter, old ones, will help us to explain the tradition and our own "deliberations" to modern children and adults but will not exhaust the multi-layered significance of Torah.

Such *midrashim* suggest fresh, but not exclusive ways of looking at things. For example, when we speak of God's Presence, we may certainly suggest specific "states of mind" without claiming that this is its exclusive meaning. We want children to understand that such formulations, representing

the religious experience of gifted persons and hence enriching to us, are "only" *midrashic*.

As we discuss the possible relevance of Dewey's thought for Jewish education two central yet related conceptions come to mind: First, Dewey insisted that thought, hence study, is inevitably related to problems, tasks and actions. It is not far-fetched or forced to be reminded thereby of the *halakhic* requirement that all learning of Torah should be for the sake of action.

Secondly: In response to the charge that the "growth" he suggests has no clear goal, Dewey responded that "if it is better to travel than to arrive, it is because traveling is a constant arriving, while arrival that precludes further traveling is most easily attained by going to sleep or dying."[20] Perhaps it is along this line that we may get a handle on the teaching of our Sages at the conclusion of *Moed Katan* (29):

> Said R. Levi ben Hayata: One who takes leave from the dead shall not say, 'Go towards peace': (*lech lishalom*) but 'go in peace' (*lech bishalom*.) One who takes leave of the living shall not say, 'Go in peace (lech bishalom) but rather, Go towards peace (*lech lishalom*')...Said R. Hiya bar Assi in the name of Rav: The disciples of the wise (*talmidai chachamim*) have no rest even in the world-to-come as it is said, "They shall go from strength to strength, each of them appearing before God in Zion.

Only the dead have, hopefully, arrived at a state of peace; for all others the blessing is that they are hopefully moving towards it. A proof-text offered for this idea is the cited verse from Psalms 84:7, which describes the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The psalmist celebrates the state of blessing in which those constantly studying, moving, "appearing before God in Zion," gain vigor from their efforts.

In the words of A. Cohen in his commentary (on the Soncino

edition of Psalms) to this verse: "The fatigues of the journey do not cause exhaustion."

Michael Rosenak *is Mandel Professor of Jewish Education at the Hebrew University and member of the Academic Board, The Jerusalem Fellows, Jerusalem. His books include Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society; Teaching Jewish Values: A Conceptual Side; and Back to the Palace: Jewish Texts and Teachings.*

Notes

[1] John Dewey, *How We Think: a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process,* (Boston: D.C. Health and Co., 1933) p. 13.

[2] John H. Hutchins, *The Conflict in Education*, New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1953), p. 72.

[3] John Dewy, *The Quest for Certainty: a study of the relation of knowledge and action*; (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1929) pp. 272 - 73

[4] For an excellent discussion of thought as "a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of competing lines of action" see Israela Ettenberg Aron, "Moral Philosophy and Moral Education II: The Formalist Tradition and the Deweyian Alternative," *School Review,* Vol. 85, No. 4, August 1977, especially pp. 523 - 531.

[5] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, New York: New American Library, 1951) pp. 111 - 112.

[6] For a description and discussion of this, see Walter Ackerman, "The Americanization of Jewish Education," *Judaism*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall 1975). Especially pp. 420 - 435; also see Ronald Kronish, "The Influence of John Dewey on Jewish Education," *Conservative Judaism* Vol. XXX, No. 2 (Winter 1976).

[7] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct; An Introduction to*

Social Psychology (New York, The Modern Library, 1950), p. 203.

[8] Ackerman, "*The Americanization of Jewish Education*," p. 420. These men were Issac Berkson, Samuel Dinin, Alexander Dushkin, Emmanuel Gamoran and Leo Honor.

[9] Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization; Towards a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*, (New York: Schoken Books, 1967).

[10] That they were not sure that the project could succeed in the American environment is indicated by Berkson's comment that "the type of adjustment demanded in the democratic countries in which the Jews live provides for only a limited and doubtful perpetuation..." Ackerman, "*The Americanization of Jewish Education*," p. 433.

[11] John Dewey, *A Common Faith,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).

[12] John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics,* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909) p. 34.

[13] *Ethics*, pp. 396 - 97. See also John Dewey, *Human Nature and Social Conduct*: Section IV.

[14] Yochanan Muffs, "Dewey on Religion: An Introduction, *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XXX, No. 2, p. 41. In this connection, see Alan Ryan *John Dewey and the High Tide of Liberalism*, (New York and London: W.W. North and Co. 1995), pp.360 - 365.

[15] Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels; modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural,* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), Chapter One.

[16] For such a negative evaluation, see Robert J. Nash, *Answering the Virtuecrats: a moral conversation on character education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), Chap. 2 - 3. I believe that, in its secular manifestations, perennialism largely deserves this censure, though it is hardly as demonic as often portrayed. That, however, is

for another discussion.

[17] John Dewey, *Experience and Education,* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

[18] Here, the model suggested by Rabbi Soloveitchik, which distinguishes between *brit goral* that unites all Jews in a common fate, and *brit ye-ud* that pinpoints the halachic and existential particularity of Jews under the yoke of Heaven, seems particularly useful though many will insist that its relevance be expanded beyond the realm of Soloveitchik's Orthodoxy. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "*Kol Dodi Dofek*," in *Ish Ha-emunah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5741) pp. 86 -94.

[19]Michael Rosenak, *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society,* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), Chapter Six.

[20]*Human Nature and Conduct* pp. 335 - 66.

Jewish Studies and Jewish Students in Independent Schools

Pearl Rock Kane

Although there are many more Jewish students in public schools, independent schools enroll more than twice the percent of college bound Jewish students. Since independent schools have latitude to design their own curricula, they are free to include courses with Jewish content. The findings of a study of independent schools in New York City and the metropolitan area indicate that although most schools offer courses in ethnic and/or religious studies, and include units within courses that relate to Holocaust studies, only one school offers a full course of Jewish studies and four schools offer full courses on the Holocaust. According to administrators surveyed at the schools neither Jewish parents nor their adolescent children are pressing schools for courses with Jewish content. Any attempt to meet the identity needs of Jewish adolescents will prove a significant challenge.

The purpose of this study was to gauge receptivity to introducing various forms of Jewish studies into the curriculum of independent schools. The study reports on the findings of a survey of independent school administrators in the metropolitan area of New York City.[1]

The Context

Independent schools are private schools that are non-profit and distinguished by their self-governance, self-support, and self-defined curriculum. They are often called "prep" schools to emphasize their academic purpose, which is preparation for four-year colleges.[2]

A goal of independent school education, and one of these school's central features, is an emphasis on character building. Independent schools aim to develop good citizens, equipped with the skills and knowledge to make their way in the world,