Immigration, Encountering Modernity and Transmitting the Core Values of the Faith

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At the City University of New York's City College, I teach a course that examines the Jewish Immigrant experience of New York. City College, or CCNY, the first of the publically established and supported colleges in 1847 was designed to serve the working class of New York. Once the educational portal to being American to a large Jewish student population, following the great Eastern European immigrations of the turn of the 20th century, CCNY is now home to Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and others who represent New York's *New Diversity*. This shift in the very definition of diversity is being driven by New York's present immigration patterns. In fact according to the New York City Department of Planning",

"In 2000, New York City had 2.9 million foreign-born residents, the largest number in its history." (1)

This wave of immigration, hailing from a multitude of nations, has created a definition of diversity perhaps unmatched in any other urban center across the globe. Those students who have chosen to take this class reflect that complex diversity interestingly few of Jewish faith make up their numbers. Early on in my teaching of this course, now in its seventh year, I would ask this diverse group of students what had attracted them to a course. During their tenure in this class, they examine how the American Jewish community has struggled with the issue of maintaining a connection to its history, traditions and values. They are introduced to a struggle that includes victories and failure. They likewise examine how this community crafted initiatives and institutions designed to specifically address this issue of connection and continuity and how to transmit these values that have been the foundations of their faith and community.

These students are also introduced to what has become a primary focus of the American or Western Jewish faith experience. How this community encounters modernity and the freedoms that are afforded by the American experience while still maintaining an allegiance to, and knowledge of, the tenets and values of its faith. Likewise, what types of educational, formal and otherwise, initiatives where created that have become the primary transmission points for this community's values and faith.

The focus on educating the next generation, so as to effectively assure continuity of the faith and its value system, has been a communal concern since the birth of

the Judaism. Towards the end of the last book of the five teachings of Moses that comprise the Torah or the sacred scriptures of the Jewish faith, Moses in his role as teacher speaks quite eloquently but forcefully to the issue of teaching the tenets of faith to the next generation.

Moses, speaking now at the end of his extraordinary mission, has been engaged in setting the base line of what this new nation, children of slaves, now need to know and do as they make a transition from the insular life of the desert to nationhood. They will now need to interface with others who beliefs would not always in concert with their new found faith. Moses admonished the people to:

"Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching. For this is not a trifling thing for you: it is your very life..." (2).

Moses, as a leader, who was not destined to be the one to lead in transition, fully understood that in order for new generations, yet unborn to successfully confront the challenges of continuity there needed to be an imperative of transmitting the divine values and ethics that forms the core of the faith and tradition that he was so instrumental in transmitting to his people. Without this imperative the power and inspiration of this transmission would soon fade into oblivion.

The imperative to "teach your children" has become over the millennia a prime focus of the Jewish people's faith and its history. While exile and sometimes-brutal oppression all too often presented incredible challenges to this imperative of continuity, the nature of the insularity of living for more than a millennium as outsiders in Christian Europe allowed for the development of a profound system of transmission.

By the opening of the 19th century, the majority of Jewish males had been put through some form of formal religious education. The most common form was call Heder (Hebrew: room) or a primary format that educated most young Jewish males in the baseline fundamentals of the faith and its tenets. Those few destined of higher learning went on to the academies of Jewish religious learning called Yeshivot.

Ironically, it was the fall of the Ghetto walls in Western Europe and the new ability to enter in the mainstream life of society that most threatened this well-established system. This enlightenment era for the Jewish community of Western Europe was called the *Haskalah*, a term derived from the Hebrew for intellect or reasoning.

Once the walls of the Ghetto began to fall following the French Revolution and the spread of liberalism throughout Western Europe the new challenge for the Jewish communities residing in France, Germany, and Great Britain was how to

meet the challenge of a growing desire and focus on a secular education as advocated and developed

The Jewish Encyclopedia, in its exposition on the Haskalah movement of the 19th century, "notes:

As long as the Jews lived in segregated communities, and as long as all avenues of social intercourse with their Gentile neighbors were closed to them, the rabbi was the most influential, and often also the wealthiest, member of the Jewish community. To the offices of religion, he added the functions of civil judge in all cases in which both parties were Jews, as well as other important administrative powers. The rabbinate was the highest aim of every Jewish youth, and the study of the Talmud was the means of obtaining that coveted position, or one of many other important communal distinctions". (3)

As the Haskalah became the predominant way of life for the Jewish community in Western Europe, religious practice and training also underwent a shift from the traditional and exclusive practices of the Ghetto to an integration of western language and practices.

This movement, most profound in post Napoleonic Germany, found its philosopher in the person of the Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn grappled with the desire and need to meld the enlightenment and newfound ability of the Jewish community of Germany to now integrate into general society. He developed a philosophical basis for melding the culture and language of the host country into the ancient religious practices and values of the Jewish people .Rather than abandon the faith be strove to provide a basis for those who embraced the new found freedoms and culture . Acknowledging the five Books of Moses, or Torah, was the basis for all Jewish tradition teachings and thought, Mendelssohn set about to translate it into German. This act echoed the translation of the Torah into Greek, in the then center of culture Alexandria, nearly 2000 years earlier when the Jewish people earlier encountered a movement from insularity to interface Hellenist culture.

"Mendelssohn strove to support and sustain the Jewish faith while advancing the cause of reason. Towards the end of his life, influenced by Kant and Jacobi, he became less confident that metaphysical precepts could be subjected to rational proof, but he did not lose confidence in their truth. He was an important Jewish figure of the eighteenth century, and his German translation of the Pentateuch anchored the Jewish Enlightenment, Haskalah. In 1783, Mendelssohn published Jerusalem, a forcible plea for freedom of conscience, described by Kant as "an irrefutable book." Its basic message was that the state has no right to interfere with the religion of its citizens, and it suggested that different religious truths might be appropriate for different cultures." (4)

By this action of making the basis of all teaching available in German, Mendelssohn attempted to stem a movement from tradition that threatened to pull a people from their traditions. Although Mendelssohn is often pointed to as the father of the reform movement that began in Germany in fact, it was his student David Friedlander who led the charge of reform that helped to form the basis for what is now the Reform Movement.

A major shift in Jewish practice and education, then adopted by the Reform Movement, was the emphasis on biblical text as opposed to the traditional focus on rabbinical writings. Along with this shift came an understanding by the protagonists of Reform Judaism that biblical text, considered divine by the traditional, or now designated orthodox, community, was human in origin or at best divinely inspired. Therefore, while held to be immutable by the Orthodox world, scripture was now subject to updating in order to meet the needs of a modern and integrative lifestyle. Accompanying this shift was the move away from the focus on rabbinic law and traditional religious strictures and practice. Services were now held in German and other accommodations to modernity were added to synagogue life. Jewish education for youth also shifted from the traditional Heder to a "Sunday School" model. The Reform movement, now emphasizing a value on an interface with and integration into the secular world, developed a complementary system to enable transmission of Jewish values and ethics that mirrored this encounter with modernity.

While the liberalization of Western Europe presented both opportunity and challenge to the Jewish community, in terms of continuity and practice, it was to be the American Experience that would become the laboratory for how this faith community would encounter modernity.

Western European 19th century experiences predicated some very important next steps and examples for America and how it was to develop a system of practice continuity and education. Yet , it was the great immigrations from 1880 – 1920 from Eastern Europe that brought the greatest challenge and set of changes for a population whose primarily faith experience was through the lens of insular traditional or Orthodox Judaism.

German Jews had began to immigrate to America since its origins but the great immigration of the mid 19th century , all be it small compared to the Eastern European flood that followed, brought with it the experiences of the hasakalah.. The German Jewish community in America of the mid 19th century began to develop a system to meet the needs of a transposed European Reform community.

"*They began to establish congregational day schools that combined secular and religious education. B'nai Jeshurun, New York City's first Ashkenazic synagogue became the first to organize a day school in 1842. A few years later, Issac Mayer Wise [a luminary of the American Reform movement] founded the Talmud*

Yeladim in Cincinnati and, in 1851, the Hebrew Educational Society was established in Philadelphia. Despite tremendous initial enthusiasm, these schools did not last beyond the Civil War era.

By the 1870s, the Jewish congregation day school movement had collapsed in disarray for a variety of reasons, including the lack of national coordination and the transient nature of the Jewish population. Also, state education systems began to satisfy the needs of many Jewish parents". (5).

Although the haskalah began to take root in the cities of Eastern Europe in the mid to late 19th century, those from the small towns know as Shtetels, which formed the bulk of this immigrant population, had little or no interface with this shift. For many of this great immigration, which numbered in the millions, this was their first face-to-face encounter with modernity and most certainly with the wide range of choice and opportunity now available in the American experience.

For the first time, those Jews fleeing from the state sponsored oppression of Eastern Europe, were not only given access to a secular education, they where in fact in this new land, obligated by the state to be educated. The primary force of education was no longer the Heder or even the state influenced Jewish schools but the secular public school. While some did attend newly established religious institutes of learning designed to mirror those of Eastern Europe, these numbers where small with the vast majority utilizing the exclusively secular public school system whose primary mission included integration and assimilation into an American culture and way of life. For the first time the overwhelming number of Jewish students sat in schools organized by the dominant culture along with their peers from many other faith, race, and cultural backgrounds.

This new and rapidly growing immigrant community had to expeditiously develop a system of religious and cultural education, both formal and informal, that would allow for the transmission of the values and traditions of the faith. This system would likewise have to be in sync with America and the Jewish communities' new ability to become a full part of the majority society. In addition, this supplementary educational system would have to compete for the loyalty of a population new to this unfolding set of new opportunities and ideas readily available to them in America.

The system that developed as this population moved from new immigrant status to being part of the American way of life revolved around four areas of focus to achieve a system that would insure faith, communal and value continuity, Supplementary Education, Day Schools, Camping and Youth Groups.

The Heder model was imported and morphed into an after school system of religious instruction with a primary goal of imparting basic knowledge of the faith, history and traditions. These after school programs became an integral part of the mission of a newly developing synagogue system that was built by this

population. While the majority of this population arrived in America with an allegiance to Orthodoxy, by the middle of the 20th century with the move to the suburbs many had adopted Conservative and Reform Judaism. This new form of supplemental Jewish education, sometimes called Talmud Torah or simply Hebrew School initially geared towards boys up to the age of 13 or the age the traditional age of entrance into the adult obligations of the faith added girls by the mid 20th century. These supplementary schools where geared towards providing a connection to and understanding of the basic tenets of the faith and its history as well as provide the necessary Hebrew language education needed for the ceremony of Bar or Bat Mitzvah or the passage into adult religious obligation. While millions were educated through this system, there has been much debate as to the ultimate effectiveness of this system. Ultimately, the success of this form of education depended on the individual school and creativity of its educators.

In response to a fear that this supplementary system simply did not provide a basis for continuity, the mid 20th century the community by the 1930's began to develop a series of Day Schools, or educational institutions that ranged from those of the ultra orthodox to the more liberal denominations. This system of orthodox oriented schools grew exponentially after World War Two with the integration of the ultra orthodox sector of the European survivor community into America. Today in America, the overwhelming majority of Orthodox boys and girls are educated in a separate sex Day School or Yeshivah system that pay varying attention to secular studies. Both the Reform and Conservative movements have likewise developed a growing Day School system that provides a comprehensive Jewish education combined with the secular.

In addition to these formal educational systems aimed at continuity and transmission of identity, faith, and values there also developed a profound informal system of Jewish education that included youth groups and summer camping. These intense and age appropriate systems provided a pathway that either supplemented the formal educational system or acted as a primary point of transmission. Both camping and youth groups allowed for emersion into aspects of the culture, faith and traditions that often left indelible lifelong impressions.

The 1990 National Jewish Population Study, conducted by the United Jewish Communities, a national umbrella group of Jewish Federations, noted that Day Schools were the most effective method of sustainable transmission. The study also noted Camping and Youth Groups as effective tools for communal continuity. As this community enters the 21st Century it is undergoing a deep examination as to what forms of education need to be emphasized to insure continuity of values and tradition.

The students that sit in my class hopefully at the end of the semester can begin to understand the lessons learned both positive and negative, of the Jewish American faith based educational experience. I likewise pray that as they

progress in their becoming American they can adopt some of the best practices and learn form the Jewish community's mistakes in transmitting their faith and its values.

The challenge of teaching a next generation the values and traditions of the faith seems to be a common one in the western world highly affected by immigrant patterns. It is a struggle that is not only necessary but also one that ultimately benefits the individual and the faith group but likewise the community at large.

1: Newest New Yorkers 2000: Department of City Planning of New York, Overview (2010)

2: *Deuteronomy 32:46-47*

3: Jewish Encyclopedia: Haskalah, Kopelman Foundation (2002)

4: New World Encyclopedia: Moses Mendelssohn, Paragon House Publishers (January 2010)

5: Jewish Schooling: Jewish education in America, from colonial times to today, American Jewish Desk Reference , The Philip Lief Group, Random House Reference; 1st edition (October 19, 1999)