

# *A Still Small Voice:* **Considering the Significance of Teacher Narratives in Contemporary Jewish Education**

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“Rav Gershenson turned to the class. “Can anyone explain the *inyan* ?” he asked quietly.

He was answered by silence.

He sighed loudly. “*Nu*,” he said, “no one can explain it.... The truth is, I cannot explain it myself. It is a difficult *inyan*. A very difficult *inyan*.” He was silent for a moment, then shook his head and smiled. “A teacher can also sometimes not know,” he said softly.

This was the first time in my life I had ever heard a rabbi admit that he didn’t understand a passage of Talmud.

We sat there in an uncomfortable silence. Rav Gershenson stared down at the open Talmud on his desk. Then he closed it slowly and dismissed the class.”

In this passage from *The Chosen* (1967), Chaim Potok offers what looks like a narrative caricature of Jewish teaching. He describes a world where teachers are invariably male and all-knowing; where Talmud provides the quintessential subject matter; and where students sit in silent awe of scholars who, they assume, will provide answers to the most difficult questions.

If Potok’s selective rendition of Jewish classroom life little resembles the world of Jewish schooling which has been increasingly researched over the last century, this extract nevertheless offers a

strong example of the ways in which the narrative form (in any number of guises) can convey the essence of teaching, its relationships and responsibilities, as well as its expectations and disappointments. It makes one wonder what we might discover about teaching and learning in Jewish schools, if those who teach (or have taught) in them would also tell their stories.

## **BACKGROUND**

The last 20 years has seen a significant move towards the development of a body of knowledge which has variously been described as *teacher lore*, as narrative inquiry in teaching or as teacher narrative study. This is a movement which has increasingly sought to attend to teachers as sources of insight into teaching, using a variety of narrative forms to obtain a perspective on their lives, work and careers.

In recent years this movement has been manifest in a thickening body of work. It has been seen, for example, in the work of narratologists who have investigated the 'personal practical knowledge' of teachers (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1983); in the efforts of those who have advocated the use of biographies and autobiographies as sources for understanding teachers (Abbs, 1974; Bateson, 1990); in life history studies which seek to tell, in Stenhouse's words, 'stories of action within a theory of context' (Goodson, 1992; Huberman, 1992); in initiatives such as the Teacher Lore Project at the University of Illinois at Chicago which endeavour 'to collect systematically the stories, insights and knowledge of experienced teachers' (Schubert and Ayers, 1992) and in the work of those who seek to capture teacher stories for professional development and personal insight (Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995).

Schubert and Ayers have suggested that the roots of this movement lie in a multitude of sources. They argue that its origins can be traced to traditions of action research which derive from the work of Dewey, to the teacher-as-researcher movement initiated by the work of Stenhouse, to the kinds of studies which have been inspired by Schon's influential depiction of the reflective practitioner, and to those

renditions of classroom life which stem from the work of Eisner and his students (1992, vii-viii). Thomas (1995) adds that a further important influence on this movement has been the development of an intellectual trend which has seen the reclamation of the subjective as a legitimate zone of enquiry, challenging the hegemony of the objective. This has seen narrative come to be regarded as a form of thought of equal validity to that used in logical thinking and inductive argument (Bruner 1986). One might add that related to this and of no less importance has been the developing articulation and elaboration of feminist epistemologies which have explored women's ways of knowing and expression (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarjule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

It is disappointing, then, that while this narrative turn has helped make known more and more about the lives of teachers in general, and of their insights and understandings, we still know relatively little about the repertoires, relationships and roles of Jewish teachers of Judaica and Hebrew. Admittedly, the last decade has seen the completion of a small number of doctoral dissertations which have employed qualitative methodologies to explore the personal orientations, perceptions and practical knowledge of Jewish teachers in Jewish schools (Chervin, 1995; Dorph, 1993; Samuels, 1992; Schoenburg, 1989). It has seen also the publication of a couple of especially commissioned qualitative studies which investigated the working lives of teachers in Jewish schools (Alexander, Dorph and Wolfson, 1988; Heilman, 1992). Otherwise, narrative pieces written by Jewish teachers, or life histories written about them, have either been concerned with the lives of Jewish teachers in non-Jewish settings, such as the New York public schools and the American civil rights movement (Markowitz, 1990; Schultz, 1996) or with their own student experiences in general education (Gersten, 1995; Neumann, 1997).

The relative scarcity of Jewish teacher narrative studies may be because on some essential level the teaching of Jewish subject matter to Jewish students is not very different from the teaching of any subject to any group of students. There may have been little need to pursue research with a particular Jewish focus because little of special significance would derive from narrative enquiry into Jewish

teaching. If those who work and live in Jewish schools were to tell their stories, what they would produce might be no more than a local variation within a broad genre of writing which has generated narratives of all forms of schooling from the pre-school to the university (e.g. Duckworth, 1997; Wein, 1995).

It is possible, however, that the paucity of non-fictional Jewish teaching narratives may have a more poignant political or epistemological significance. It might betray an unwillingness to listen to those who teach in Jewish schools because they are merely teachers, or because what they have to say may, as Goodson has put it, “work against the grain of power/knowledge as held and produced by administrators” (1992, 11). In this case, the stories of Jewish teachers may be doubly underprivileged in terms of what Becker calls “the hierarchy of credibility regarding those to whom we tend to listen” (1970, 126). First, because these stories might not fit with many of the theories around which systems of Jewish education have come to be organized. Second, because theories of Jewish education may themselves be judged as narrow or parochial when set alongside theories of education which come from outside the Jewish community.

Of course, it is equally possible that the thinness of narrative enquiry into Jewish education may simply reflect uncertainty about how to listen to teachers, or what to do with the stories they tell. It may be that like other narrative genres, teacher narratives seem somehow too raw and unfiltered, or perhaps value-laden and subjective, to be reliable and generalizable (Coles, 1989). Such narratives might look little more substantial than staff-room gossip or car-park complaint.

The project outlined in this paper represents an attempt to begin bringing clarity to questions such as these. It describes what primarily has been an effort to generate narratives authored by those who live and work in Jewish schools in order that we might ask in an informed fashion whether such accounts might serve as significant sources of insight into Jewish education. Secondly, it has aimed to investigate what it might mean for those who live and work in Jewish schools to engage in a process of narrative self-inquiry. It has attempted to

understand how Jewish teachers experience the process of telling their stories and recounting their lives and work. Lastly, it has intended to facilitate informed speculation about how narratives authored by those who work in Jewish schools might be employed by their professional colleagues.

## **PROJECT DESIGN**

### ***Participants***

Six Jewish day school principals in Toronto, Canada and six in London, England were asked to permit the participation of two or three teachers from their schools in a year-long project during which teachers would keep a journal about their lives and work. Participants from two different countries were invited in the hope that at some point it might be possible to examine the extent to which communal or national factors have an impact on the content of the narratives produced.

In two cases, principals encouraged the researcher to approach their teaching staff directly, so as to explain the project and to see whether any volunteers came forward. In one case, a principal chose not to permit any of her teachers to participate, expressing concern that the exercise would simply encourage teachers to complain about their work. In all other cases, principals nominated teachers whom they invited to be involved, leaving it to these individuals to decide whether they wished to take part.

At the project's start, eight teachers in Toronto from five schools committed themselves to participate. A further seven were nominated by their principals to take part but declined. Two of those invited to take part were male, but when the project began all participants were women. After two months, two of these original participants withdrew from further involvement.

In London, nine teachers from six different schools agreed, following an invitation from their principals, to take part in an orientation day for the project. Of these, three were male. At the start of the project proper, three women from three different schools

committed themselves to participate through the year. Nine months after the start of the project six teachers from Toronto and three from London continued to be involved.

### ***Structure***

The process of narrative enquiry in this project was built around strategies for writing teacher narratives proposed by Connelly and Clandinin (1988) and by Jalongo and Isenberg (1995). In this case, the London participants took part in a day-long orientation in the practices of teacher narrative enquiry. As a group, they worked through and reflected on four narrative-generating strategies: Sharing a success story (adapted from Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995), telling why and how they became teachers, listing the main dimensions of being a teacher of Jewish studies (adapted from Connelly and Clandinin, 1988), and elaborating their own personal metaphors of teaching (adapted from Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). Together, they also read and reflected on a collection of four short teaching narratives, two of which came from traditional Jewish sources.

In Toronto, three teachers from one school came together for half a day of orientation modeled on that in London. Otherwise, participants were orientated to the project through lengthy telephone conversations and written correspondence.

In all cases, participants were given a hard-bound journal in which they were asked to write, at least once every two weeks, about any aspect of their lives and work which they regarded as having been important for and in their teaching. Although a number initially asked for more directed guidance about what their writing should concern, or sought reassurance that they were writing about appropriate matters, all those who have continued to participate have appeared comfortable with the notion that, given the project's pilot nature, it is important that they themselves determine their own narrative agendas. While this does not eliminate the possibility that participants have written about those things which they think others might find interesting or important, an explicit attempt has been made to encourage and support participants in writing about experiences and

issues from within or without school which have been important to them, no matter how obscure, surprising or mundane they think these might appear to others.

This studied open-endedness has in fact been one of the reasons for organizing a once a month conversation between a project team member and individual project participants. These informal meetings have provided an opportunity to support participants in valuing the concerns which they themselves have chosen to raise, rather than directing them towards some latent research agenda. These meetings, organized in cafes, participants' homes and in their empty classrooms, have tried to encourage participants to elaborate further on aspects of their writing, to fill in what they regard as gaps in their narrative accounts or to revise whatever they may have recorded. They are also intended to enable participants to reflect on what the experience of keeping a journal has meant to them.

While there has been a danger that such conversations might have cued participants to reflect on particular aspects of their life and work, simply because they may have picked up on themes which have grown in conversation, at this stage there is little indication that the range of issues or experiences reflected on in journals has become any narrower than those originally raised. Throughout, the tone of these exchanges has been closer to that of a conversation, in which the teacher's narrative text has served as a basis for a collegial exchange of stories, rather than the context for a follow-up interview.

## **PROJECT FINDINGS**

Although the project is still ongoing, at this point, nine months after its start, it has generated a rich collection of engaging, often personal and highly individual texts which touch on a diversity of issues and experiences. Most of the themes raised can be characterized as generic to the life and work of teachers. They relate, for example, to the school as a workplace, to the problematics of pedagogy, to the rhythm of the school year, to tensions between personal and professional life, and to the relationships which develop

between teachers, their students and their students' parents. In this way they are comparable to stories and narratives found in other published collections of journal-based teacher enquiries (Fuschs, 1967; Holly, 1989; Miller, 1991). And yet within this thematic mosaic which so vividly portrays what it means to be a teacher – any kind of teacher – there are narrative pieces which do seem to represent images and issues which might in some way be particular to Jewish education, or to the experiences of those who live and work in Jewish schools.

In this section, extracts from three such teacher narratives are offered, not because it can be claimed that these accounts unambiguously constitute narratives of Jewish teaching, but rather because their varying particularity may help focus discussion about whether or not it is valid to regard certain narratives as having special meaning or significance for Jewish education.

These texts constitute a limited sample from within the oral and written accounts which the project has so far generated. They are not typical in the way that they all relate to experiences or events which have occurred within the classroom.

### **Text one: A new/old story about letters**

On November 24 Leslie wrote:

I think it's the playfulness of these children's nature that has made my storytelling take off. I used to tell a story about the letter ן, who became a ן - a story told to me by my Grade One Hebrew teacher. Other classes have let it go at that, but with each new letter, they said "Tell us a story!" And so, there was a ך, who became a ך (over-dieting), the show-off ן who became a ן (he so irritated another kid that the kid stood on his tail), the ן who tried out being a ן, but couldn't make it up the hill, etc. All the stories took place near the school (at Starbucks, the bagel bakery, the library) and they all shared the same structure - something happens to change the shape of the letter, his mom



sees and says (kids join in) - *Oy VaVoy, Mah karah ?* You look like the \_\_\_ family down the street.

I acted the stories out, and as I got more involved with what remained entirely spontaneously-created, the kids started to clap at the end. Then, after class, the kids would start telling me other stories they had created for the letters. Finally, I heard a boy read a story in his English class, about an R who becomes a P, and when his mother saw him, etc. etc.

### **Text two: How do our parents feel ?**

On September 28 Leslie wrote:

*Parashat Hashavuah* is aimed so well at the grade fours. They can go beyond what's written, whether a law or a story, and see the abstract concepts. This week we discussed leadership, and what qualities would be needed in a leader that follows Moses. In realizing that the new leader was needed to lead in battle as well, we moved into the ethics/historical foundations of tribal/national movement, reasons for movement (e.g. hunger, religious persecution, overcrowding, 'God tells you to'). From these to the morality of war, other options for resolution, places where solutions have not been found, terrorism in Israel, suicide bombers, why would someone give their life for God, for a cause, for love.

One girl raises her hand at this point and says "If my little brother (a baby half-brother) were in the path of a car, I would push him away and let the car hit me instead. I've been lucky to already have lived 9 years, but he's hardly had a chance to live at all". Profoundly moved by what she said, I said that's how I feel about my children. As the kids started to wonder aloud if that's how their parents feel, I closed the conversation, and suggested that it continue at home.

### **Text three: A problem in prayer**

On October 22, Eva wrote:

R's dad is dying of cancer..I know that he needs attention and I feel so bad for him. When my mom got cancer, I was already

18, and I had a very difficult time dealing with it. Poor R. is only 7 years old.

Whenever we do the amidah in tephilot, R. adds his dad's name in the list of those we wish health. Yet, he never really says all the prayers, except this one.

A week later (October 29) Eva continued:

I taught the *birchot hashachar* today. From previous experience, it is a good lesson. The students give examples and we talk about why we thank G-d for all these things.

Yet, today was different.

As we are learning the various blessings, R. mumbles under his breath "No He doesn't", after each blessing. I knew what he was saying and why. I chose not to comment on it to him, feeling that the other 23 students in the class need to learn that "He does". Yet my own personal feelings of doubt stayed with me.

Usually when I come to school, I take on the role of the 'faithful', *I believe*, and *He does*.

And yet R. was able to pull me back each time and remind me, that even in my own experiences, "He doesn't always".

It has never happened before, but today I felt like a hypocrite.

As previously signaled, it is intended in this section to offer readings of these texts so as to make it possible to consider the extent to which they may be regarded as possessing special meaning and significance for Jewish education.

In a formal sense, all of these three accounts are organized around the commonplaces of Jewish education, being related to Jewish subject matter, teachers, students and milieu. At the same time, it is evident that they resonate in ways which transcend the particularities of Jewish education. Thus, Eva's account of a problem in prayer speaks of what Britzman has referred to as the terrible problem of knowing thyself, of reconciling a sense of self and of role (1992). It exemplifies also the pedagogic problem of reconciling the needs of individual students with those of a whole class. Leslie's *parashat hashavua* story captures poignantly (and echoes uncannily) what Coles has richly depicted as the spiritual journey of all children, as they wrestle with the

implications of human mortality (1989). It can be read as a story of children developing a sense of wonder through the inspiration of a skilled (religious) educator (Cox, 1983). Her new/old story about letters provides helpful affirmation of Sarason's (1971) claim that pedagogy is rooted in teachers' memories of their own schooling. It exemplifies also the fertility and force which Egan has found in teaching as storytelling at all levels of schooling (1988).

It appears, then, that the location of these stories in Jewish day schools and in Jewish studies classrooms does not make them necessarily or even primarily Jewish stories. Nevertheless, it also seems that some of these narratives, if read in certain ways, might serve as special sources of insight into Jewish education and into what it means to be a Jewish teacher.

In Leslie's first story, for example, the Jewish implications of the narrative are enmeshed within the general significance of the text. Superficially, this is a story concerned with the developing recognition of Hebrew letters by young Jewish children in a Jewish senior kindergarten. More profoundly, it also offers an opportunity to see how an experienced teacher has been inspired by the changing interaction she experiences with different groups of students each year. It allows us to see how Leslie enables students to construct and develop their own understandings around the narrative frame which she provides.

Beyond this, there seems to be a further layer of significance. Leslie's creative effort to demystify the unfamiliar and make meaning out of inscrutable symbols by placing them within the familiar environment of the students' own neighbourhood seems to speak of particular challenges in contemporary Jewish education. For it is likely that Leslie's students find these letters so unfamiliar not only because they are pre-readers who cannot yet decode them, but also because they rarely encounter the Hebrew alphabet outside their non-orthodox day school. These are not just inscrutable symbols, they are probably invisible ones, and it takes a particular kind of pedagogic creativity to bring them, vividly, into the lives of students. If Leslie, therefore, draws satisfaction from hearing how her students have transferred her aggadic approach to their English letter work, one suspects that it may be as much from a sense of irony at seeing her old Hebrew teacher's

methodology being employed in her students' English language arts class as from the professional satisfaction which comes from providing her students with an effective learning tool.

Arguably, Leslie's second story more readily points to a reading of Jewish educational significance. Admittedly, the kinds of questions with which the children are seen engaging are not peculiarly Jewish ones, nor is it only Jewish children who are able to wrestle with them. As previously noted, there is evidence to suggest that all children can and do reflect on such moral and spiritual questions (Coles, 1989). However, as Leslie herself suggests at the start of the story, and as she further elaborated in later conversation, there is much about the teaching here (and its context) which makes it noteworthy as an episode in Jewish education.

As a former teacher of English, Leslie explained that she has been both troubled and inspired by the distortions which the teaching of Jewish studies to young Jewish children has imposed on her pedagogic practice and on her sense of responsibility as a teacher. On the one hand, she has found herself continually having to fight against the temptation to lower her teaching expectations because of the difficulties of conducting lessons in Hebrew with young children for whom it is a foreign language. Much of her creative energy, she complained, has been directed towards bypassing or overcoming students' difficulties with the language of instruction. On the other hand, because of the obligation she feels to explore (in English) the weekly Torah portion with her students, she has also found herself dramatically upgrading her teaching goals. She has frequently explored deep or difficult questions with her class which most teachers would rarely contemplate raising with nine year-olds.

For Leslie, teaching Jewish studies in a Jewish school is not any kind of teaching. It comes with special problems and possibilities because of its linguistic and cultural context. From her perspective, the centrality of Torah to Jewish self-understanding makes special demands of teachers. It is as if she sees herself, like rabbis and teachers for thousands of years, as obligated to weave a fabric of enquiry which joins the weekly Torah portion to the lives of her students, even if this often requires starting out from texts and questions which seem far

removed from students' interests and concerns. It is significant that her method, in gently moving students through a winding set of often tangential concerns, bears a strong resemblance to the layered hermeneutics of the midrashic method. Tacitly, this most progressive and creative of teachers has developed a teaching style which is not unlike the earliest forms of Torah teaching.

In telling this story, Leslie not only celebrates the way in which the study of Torah is capable of moving young children to ask profound questions about their lives, she shows also how, through skillful mediation, traditional texts can shape the rhythm of weekly classroom life so as to have significance for the way children think about themselves. In many orthodox Jewish homes, students are obliged to report to their parents each Sabbath on some aspect of the weekly Torah portion - on "what answers they can give this week". Strikingly, students in Leslie's class *choose* to take home questions for which they still seek answers.

Of the three narratives gathered here, Eva's story about prayer seems to speak most explicitly about what it means to be a Jewish teacher, even if, as we have argued above, the discomfort she experiences within her role is by no means particular to Jewish teachers. Becoming any kind of teacher means struggling with unrehearsed or unfamiliar roles. Thus, Eva's discomfort with the gap between who she is and who she thinks she ought to be strongly resonates with a body of autobiographical literature which explores the problematic psychological journey involved in becoming a teacher (Braithwaite, 1959; Kaufman, 1964).

As a narrative of teaching, Eva's story is perhaps more generalizable than either of the accounts composed by Leslie, and yet, there is a dimension to this narrative which cannot be merely reduced to general psychological constructs. In telling this story of practice, Eva seems to be wrestling with questions which go to the heart of what it means to be a Jewish teacher in a Jewish school.

Eva's account tells of how she has resolved the challenge posed by R.'s problems with prayer in a way which she feels best meets the needs of the class as a whole. At the same time, it conveys how she remains uncertain about the integrity of her role and about the

appropriateness of her response, as least as far as R. is concerned. What is supposed to be her role as a teacher in a Jewish day school? Should she be encouraging all of her seven year-old students to articulate challenging questions about God, as R. does, or should she be more concerned with socializing them into a common set of Jewish practices and beliefs? Is there much point in trying to compel someone like R. to pray who would not otherwise wish to? Can she provide enough room for R. to ask his difficult questions, while the rest of the class continues to find meaning through their practice?

Eva's narrative gives full voice to the uncertainty of many who work in Jewish day schools about what these places are for and especially about the role of prayer within them. Should and can schools address ultimate questions about life and death or, as one of Eva's colleagues has put it, isn't that what camp is for? Painfully, as this narrative shows, if teachers do begin to teach about God, they must be ready to expose much about themselves which is personal or private. As Eva reveals with honesty, they should be prepared to face some demanding or problematic consequences in terms of the ways in which they think about themselves and their teaching relationships.

## IMPLICATIONS

The diverse readings inspired by these accounts suggest how inappropriate it would be to characterize a teacher's story as necessarily constituting a narrative of Jewish teaching because it is composed around the lives of Jewish teachers, students, subject matter or milieu. More realistically, it seems that the extent to which a narrative can serve as a source of insight into Jewish schooling is as much determined by the strength of the reading derived from the text as by points of reference within the text itself. This, in fact, is a hermeneutic commonplace which is hardly remarkable. Nevertheless, we would suggest that the very fact that the few narratives here have shown themselves capable of supporting readings which engage in sometimes powerful ways with questions of significance for Jewish education is noteworthy. For, despite dealing with apparently mundane

events, they do offer points of access to reflection on deep and complex issues which are of concern to practitioners and philosophers of Jewish education. It may be grandiose to refer to accounts such as these as constituting a body of knowledge, but they do give expression to a form of embodied knowledge which it would be valuable to explore further in a more elaborate fashion.

Beyond this, it appears that this study points towards other important implications which merit continuing attention. As previously indicated, the project's original conception was as much motivated by interest in how Jewish teachers experienced the process of telling their stories as in the character of the stories they told. Here, there is evidence which points in different directions.

First, it is notable that of the 24 teachers who either originally volunteered or were nominated to be involved in the project only nine have continued to do so. While participant erosion is an anticipated dimension of any research project such as this, it would be interesting to investigate further why more than 60 percent of those who took part in preliminary orientation discussions chose not to proceed further. Most complained that workload was to blame, but it would be useful to explore the extent to which teachers shared a view expressed by one principal when he queried what teachers would learn from a project of this nature if the project initiators were not intending to teach the participants anything. Were teachers put off by a sense that this was another occasion when they were expected to give without expecting much in return, or was it that they were so overloaded that they could not spare an hour a week for a new commitment no matter how worthwhile?

This question becomes especially intriguing when one sets it alongside the different responses of those who have continued to participate. On the one hand, participants have invariably voiced their satisfaction and sense of reward in being provided with a framework in which to contemplate and reflect on what they do and who they are. A number have described the process as having been cathartic, or as having been an opportunity to be taken seriously. They were happy to have had a chance to tell their stories in a non-judgmental context. Thus, one participant, who had evidently fallen asleep while writing her

journal, was not tempted to withdraw because, she explained, she too much valued the opportunity to make a record of her teaching year. In these ways, participants have found meaning and significance in the process of narrative enquiry in a manner which fits with findings reported in other studies of this nature (Jalongo, 1992; Nias and Aspinwall 1995; Yonemura, 1982).

On the other hand, there have been some participants who have suggested that the benefits of participation have been more ambiguous. In conversation, one participant, who had been writing steadily and seriously for many months, began to wonder whether because of this process, she was becoming too introspective about her work in school, and whether it was encouraging her to take quite a bleak view of her comfort there. She could not be sure if this was how she would anyway be thinking, given some very difficult experiences during the course of the year, or if the process of narrative enquiry had fostered such a frame of mind.

This response echoes with one of Leslie's entries. She wrote:

"The process of keeping a journal is shaping my experience of the year, I think, and I'm not sure if it's good or bad. By analysing my feelings and experiences, I find myself dwelling on aspects that I probably ignore. So, on the one hand, I'm able to understand what's happening and remedy it, on the other hand, I'm more aware of dissatisfactions. Or, perhaps it's just coincidental that I'm feeling a bit low/unexcited about teaching now. Or, perhaps, I feel this way every January/ February and have never charted when it happens. Am I channeling energies into the analysis that perhaps I'd channel into the teaching itself?"

These thoughts lucidly capture a difficult ambiguity within the process of narrative enquiry which has not been widely reported. They suggest how teachers may experience this process as both liberating and crippling. It would seem that the process of keeping a journal, for example, might encourage passive reflection rather than active engagement, it might foster a state of mind which dwells on problems rather than successes, or it may enable teachers to confront and overcome realities which others would prefer them to ignore. These



mixed responses suggest a need for some circumspection in treating those findings which widely report the beneficial political, personal and professional consequences which come from developing frameworks for narrative enquiry. They further suggest a need for caution in recommending projects of this nature as inherently suited to the development of professional self-esteem or reflective practice.

Perhaps, then, the least ambiguous implication of this project is in terms of what these accounts might promise for readers rather than writers of these stories. For, whether or not these texts can offer insights into the essences of Jewish education, and how we make sense of them, we can state with certainty that they do tell stories of Jewish teachers. This may sound banal, but we would argue that it is in fact significant, when so few contemporary accounts of Jewish teaching exist.

Numerous autobiographies have attested to the way in which the journeys of many teachers into the teaching profession have been profoundly influenced by the well-told stories of other educators. Teachers have found themselves or have found inspiration in the stories which other teachers tell (Isenberg, 1994). Such narratives, fictional or otherwise, have enabled them to place themselves within a professional community which has enhanced their self-esteem or which has helped them make sense of their own lives and work through the vicarious experience of the lives of others.

For Jewish teachers, there are at present perhaps only two bodies of literature which are able to play such a role, and for different reasons, these are as likely to inspire as to appall. On the one hand, there is an ancient body of aggadic literature which is rich with anecdotes and stories of teachers and their students. There are Talmudic texts which can be characterized as offering transcripts of classroom talk or of conversations about and among students and teachers. On the other hand, there is a more recent body of work which has emerged within North American fiction in which protagonists reflect on the terrible impact of their own Jewish schooling. In this case, and on an almost epidemic scale, writers like Roth, Richler and Malamud have offered accounts of Jews scarred or mesmerized by their Jewish education.

Prospective or practising Jewish teachers lack a larger frame of reference within which to make sense of their lives and work. They can draw on their own memories of schooling or on their conversations with colleagues, but these sources do little to establish a formal or publicly validated sense of professional community, especially for those who stand on the threshold of that community. It may not be unrealistic, therefore, to imagine that the kinds of texts generated by a project such as this might help teachers to locate themselves, or to identify (with) a professional community where they can find a home. It would not so much promise a moment of political liberation as an opportunity to support new teachers as they set out on an important professional and personal journey.

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