

# DEWEYAN DELIBERATION AS A MODEL FOR DECISION-MAKING IN JEWISH EDUCATION

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The dissertation upon which this paper is based is entitled: *Curricular Proposals for the Ethical and Political Education of Adolescents: Overcoming Dogmatism and Relativism, and Teaching Deweyan Deliberation*.<sup>1</sup> This rather cumbersome title derives from the rather cumbersome nature of the work itself, which consists of three distinct parts: 1) a practical educational problem; 2) a methodology whereby curricular solutions to that problem are sought; and 3) a philosophical context in which the entire work is placed. The practical problem which constituted the starting point of the dissertation was that of dogmatic and relativistic thinking in adolescence; by this I mean the tendency of adolescents to be rigid and closed in their thinking, on the one hand, and vague and indecisive on the other. While dogmatic and relativistic thinking is common among adults, the research of such psychologists as William Perry, Robert Lifton, Kenneth Keniston, Lawrence Kohlberg and Carl Frankenstein indicates that the tendency to fall into this way of thinking is especially pronounced in adolescents.<sup>2</sup>

1. Isa Aron. *Curricular Proposals for the Ethical and Political Education of Adolescents: Overcoming Dogmatism and Relativism, and Teaching Deweyan Deliberation*, unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975.

2. William G. Perry. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), 1970. Robert Jay Lifton. "Youth and History: Individual Change in Postwar Japan," in: Erik H. Erikson (Ed.), *The Challenge of Youth* (New York: Anchor Books), 1965. Kenneth Keniston. *The Uncommitted* (New York: Dell), 1965. L. Kohl-

Once the problem was defined, the purpose of the dissertation was to arrive at curricular solutions. Towards this end, I used the methodology outlined by Joseph Schwab in his writings on "The Practical."<sup>3</sup> Three psychological theories, those of Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carl Frankenstein, were examined, in an effort to determine the way in which each theory explains the phenomena of adolescent dogmatism and relativism. Following Schwab's model, the theories were then analyzed by means of a set of commonplaces, so that the areas of conflict and complementarity between them could be exposed. Ultimately, strategies for dealing with adolescent dogmatism and relativism were derived from each theory, and the final choice of curricular solutions was based on an understanding of which interventions would be in harmony with each other and with the philosophical context of the study. The bulk of the study, however, focused on the use of Schwab's methodology, and the study became, in effect, an exercise in the application of the method to a practical problem.

Finally, the third part of the dissertation was the philosophical context, which served as a framework for the first parts. The need for a philosophical context became clear as soon as I asked myself what was wrong with dogmatism and relativism. If these are bad ways to think, is there a correct or better way? The answer to this question was derived from the writings of John Dewey; Dewey's notion of deliberation was taken as a model for ethical and political thinking.

Although I believe that all three parts of the dissertation — the practical problem of adolescent dogmatism and relativism, the methodological exercise in the application of Schwab's "Practical," and the Deweyan context — have far-reaching implications for Jewish education, limitations of space compel me to narrow my focus and discuss only one of these in the present paper. I have

berg and R. Kramer. "Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development," *Human Development*, XII (1969), pp. 93-120.  
Carl Frankenstein. *Roots of the Ego* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins), 1966.

3. Joseph J. Schwab. *The Practical: A Language for Curriculum* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association), 1970.

Joseph J. Schwab. "The Practical: Arts of Eclectic," *School Review*, LXXIX (1971), pp. 493-542.

chosen, therefore, to concentrate on the Deweyan concept of deliberation and its application to curricular decision-making in Jewish education.

The plan of this paper is as follows: It will begin with a general discussion of Deweyan deliberation, and will point out both its special virtues and its major limitations. It will then discuss the applicability of deliberation (which Dewey held to be a model for all thinking, theoretical as well as practical) to the process of curricular decision-making in Jewish education. A Deweyan approach to curricular decision-making will be counterposed to the more standard model of decision-making in American education today, and the way in which a Deweyan approach would answer the special needs of Jewish education will be examined.

### **Deweyan Deliberations**

Dewey himself described deliberation as “a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing lines of action.”<sup>4</sup> Human beings, in his view, normally act according to habits, acquired predispositions which they follow without reflection. In problematic situations, however, prior habits fail the individual in some way. Perhaps they no longer satisfy his or her desires; perhaps two habits conflict and a choice must be made between them. The result is a temporary suspension of action, during which there is an opportunity for reflection. “There is . . . but one issue involved in all reflection upon conduct: the rectifying of present troubles, the harmonizing of present incompatibilities by projecting a course of action which gathers into itself the meaning of them all.”<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize Dewey’s actual contention that deliberation can only arise out of concrete and actual dilemmas and conflicts. Only if the problem is felt can deliberation come to a satisfactory conclusion.

Deliberation begins with the formulation of the issue, the conversion of the preliminary sense of indeterminacy into a

4. John Dewey. *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: The Modern Library), 1930 (originally published, 1922), p. 179.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

stated problem. The first step is crucial, since the statement of the problem determines the form of proposed solutions. The initial formulation need not remain fixed, however; at a later stage the deliberator may decide that the situation is best defined in a different way.

Once the problem is formulated, the task of the deliberator is to entertain actively as many solutions as possible. He or she must consider a broad range of possible actions and must imagine the result of each. The competing lines of action cannot, according to Dewey, be evaluated by a prior or abstract standard (such as an ultimate principle) but must be assessed in terms of their consequences. These consequences must be construed broadly; not only direct and immediate results, but also indirect and long-term ones must be taken into account. There is not one consequence of an act but a plurality of consequences. Moreover, the consequences of an act include the effects it will have on the character of the deliberator as well as its effects on the physical and social environment.

The forecasting of consequences is a delicate operation requiring knowledge of one's physical surroundings, the society, human nature in general, and one's own character in particular. It often involves a search for new knowledge. The more acute the deliberator's assessment of human nature and dispositions, the more accurate will be his or her projection of consequences. A memory of the outcomes of comparable actions and decisions is an important aid in deliberation; yet the deliberator must bear in mind the possibility that conditions have changed. Principles and ideals too are useful tools for deliberation, for they represent the result, in summary form, of age-old deliberations. Precisely because of their long history, however, certain principles or rules may be outdated, not suitable for current situations. Thus the deliberator must be aware of the need to modify and readapt traditional principles and rules.

The forecasting of consequences is continually endangered by the biases of both habit and desire.

We see what we want to see, we obscure what is unfavorable to a cherished, probably unavowed, wish. We dwell upon favoring circumstances till they have become weighted with reinforcing considera-

tions. We don't give opposing consequences half a chance to develop in thought.<sup>6</sup>

The deliberator must be constantly on guard against the biases which may distort his or her perception of consequences.

Once the consequences of as many different courses of action as possible have been projected, how is the final decision reached? At this point, Dewey's account differs most sharply from those of most philosophers, for Dewey claims that one cannot know the correctness of a decision intellectually. Instead, he says, one feels the desirability of a consequence, one experiences the appropriateness of a particular choice. Just as one's feelings of confusion or conflict give rise to the deliberation, so one's feelings of unity, harmony, and resolution are an indication that it has terminated successfully. This is not to say that the doubt arises from subjective factors alone; Dewey states explicitly that genuine problems arise from indeterminacies that are objective characteristics of situations. Yet the deliberator can only sense an indeterminacy through direct and immediate perception; he or she does not know there is a problem in the sense that one knows a fact. Likewise, though the solution to a problem is an objective occurrence, the feelings attendant upon it are the best indicators of its appropriateness. Once the deliberator knows the reasons for and against different courses of action, he or she can feel that a particular one is most appropriate.

Complacency and annoyance follow hard on the heels of any object presented in image as they do upon its sensuous experience. Some objects when thought of are congruent to our existing state of activity. They fit in, they are welcome. They agree, or are agreeable, not as a matter of calculation, but as a matter of experienced fact.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that one can experience the correctness of a choice explains why Dewey refers to deliberation as a "dramatic rehearsal."

6. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

The feeling of harmony and unity which comes at the close of a successful deliberation is qualitatively different from the feeling of a momentary or chance pleasure.

Enjoyments that issue from conduct directed by insight into relations have a meaning and validity due to the way in which they are experienced. Such enjoyments are not repented of; they generate no after-taste of bitterness. Even in the midst of direct enjoyment, there is a sense of validity, of authorization, which intensifies the enjoyment. There is a solicitude for perpetuation of the object having value which is radically different from the mere anxiety to perpetuate the feeling of enjoyment.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, experienced deliberators come to have a sense of confidence in their ability to perceive directly and immediately that a particular consequence is desirable. Likewise, with experience, deliberators may learn to be more accurate in their estimation of consequences; they also learn what their particular biases are and in what way these biases are likely to prejudice their deliberations. Of course, even the best of deliberations may fail to foresee a particular consequence, and a course of action decided upon may prove, in the end, to have been mistaken. This possibility is unavoidable. Yet in most cases a careful attention to consequences, the anticipatory generation of alternatives, and a diligent avoidance of prejudices will result in judgments and actions that will not be regretted later.

### **Limitation of the Deweyan Approach**

The emphasis in this paper on the strengths of Dewey's philosophical position should not be taken as an indication that this approach has no shortcomings. In fact, Dewey's concept of deliberation seems to have a serious limitation in that it endorses a highly individualistic method of decision-making. If one accepts his contentions that moral discussion should focus on decision-making in concrete cases, rather than on abstract rule-

8. John Dewey. *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), p. 267.

making and justification, and that, ultimately, moral choice, though informed by rational considerations, is best made by a reliance on direct emotional perception, then morality becomes an individualistic endeavor. In a concrete deliberation no one but the deliberator is in a position to ascertain how he or she will feel about alternative outcomes. It seems likely, then, that occasions will arise in which two deliberators in similar circumstances will choose different courses of action. A more formidable problem is raised by cases in which the actions of a group of people are in question. Group deliberation is not guaranteed to yield consensus; on the contrary, Dewey's emphasis on the emotional factor in choice all but guarantees that different deliberators will arrive at different decisions. A recognition of this difficulty has led some critics to charge that Dewey's theory is relativistic. But Dewey's position is not that of a relativist, who claims that all questions of value are mere matters of opinion and are not worthy of serious discussion and consideration. On the contrary, he holds that serious discussion and careful deliberation are what should inform one's final feelings. Furthermore, there is, in theory, a clear criterion for evaluating decisions. If all the consequences of an action could be listed, we would then be able to assess the correctness of a particular decision. That such a listing of ultimate consequences will only be completed when the Messiah comes does not help us in our practice, but it does save the theory from the charge of relativism.

In practice, the individualistic nature of Dewey's method means that the more complicated the decision, the more likely it is that the deliberation will fail. In other words, when many choices are available to the deliberator, when his or her knowledge of the consequences of an action are incomplete, and when he or she has a great emotional stake in the outcome, the chances of coming up with a good decision (i.e., one that correctly forecasts both the consequences and our emotional reaction to them) are diminished.

It is no wonder, therefore, that despite Dewey's own stature as an educator, his model of deliberation has rarely been used as a conscious model for curricular decision-making. For in education our choices are many, our knowledge of the consequences of any action is scanty, partial, and highly contested, and our emotional investment in the final outcome is extremely high. None-

theless, it seems ironic that Deweyan deliberation has not been more widely adopted by curriculum experts, while so many other educational "movements" (e.g. progressive education, vocational education and the open classroom) consider Dewey to be their patron saint. Indeed, I would argue that the use of deliberation as a methodology for curricular decision-making is one of the most authentic applications of Dewey's philosophy to education. I would also argue that Deweyan deliberation is badly needed as a supplement (even as an antidote) to the standard method of curricular decision-making, which is utilized in most schools and taught in most schools of education. Finally, I would argue that because of the special problems of non-orthodox Jewish education, Deweyan deliberation is particularly suitable as a model for curricular decision-making in this area. I have tried to substantiate the first of these claims in the section on Deweyan deliberation. In order to substantiate the second and third claims, an examination and critique of the standard method of curricular decision-making will be necessary, and it is to this that I now turn.

### **The Standard Model of Curricular Decision-Making**

The dominant approach to curricular decision-making in America today derives from Ralph Tyler,<sup>9</sup> and has been refined by such prominent educators as Bloom<sup>10</sup> and Popham.<sup>11</sup> According to this approach, the educator must begin by enunciating his or her *goals* in very broad terms. Each goal must then be defined and specified into a series of *objectives*. For example, the goal of "becoming a good citizen" might be broken down into such components as "obeying laws," "voting in elections," or "being

9. Ralph Tyler. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1950.

10. Benjamin S. Bloom, *et. al. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longmans, Green-David McKay), 1956.

11. William James Popham. *Educational Criteria Measures* (Inglewood, California: Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development), 1967.



knowledgeable about civic affairs"; the latter objective might be specified behaviorally as "stating the names of one's senators and congressmen," and "citing their opinions on three controversial public issues." The curriculum maker would then survey the available research on educational methodologies and technologies, and would incorporate the most successful means of achieving his or her objectives into the curriculum. Finally, he or she would devise a method for evaluating the extent to which the objectives have been met.

This approach to curricular decision-making has not been without its critics, who have charged that it has led educators to ignore some of the most important issues and outcomes in their field.<sup>12</sup> But one does not have to enter into the terms of this debate (which is worthy of several dissertations in itself) in order to note that this seemingly rational and orderly method of decision-making is rational and orderly only when four conditions prevail:

1. when there is a general consensus as to the validity of the goals;
2. when there is a general consensus as to the meaning of the goals and of the objectives that each entails;
3. when agreement is fairly easily obtained as to whether or not each objective has been met;
4. when there is a substantial body of research as to the efficacy of the methodologies for attaining each objective.

Thus, for example, when the goal is teaching students to read, this approach works fairly well: 1) Everyone agrees that reading is important; it is fairly easy to determine both 2) what constitutes reading, and 3) whether or not someone is able to read; finally, 4) a large body of research exists on the relative efficacy of various methods of teaching reading. A good deal of controversy exists as to which of these methods works best, but since this controversy arises only at the final stage, it does not unduly encumber the decision-making process.

In Jewish education, however, the matter is entirely different, and the controversy begins at the outset: 1) to paraphrase a trite

12. William E. Doll. "Methodology of Experience: An Alternative to Behavioral Objectives," *Educational Theory*, XXII (1972), pp. 309-324.

Harry S. Broudy. "Can Research Escape the Dogma of Behavioral Objectives?" *School Review*, LXXIX, (1970) pp. 43-56.

old line, put two Jews together on an island and you will have three entirely different lists of goals, or at least 2) three different ways of specifying each goal into objectives. 3) Given the abstract and elusive nature of the goals and objectives most commonly held, it is often difficult to determine whether or not an objective is being met. How can you tell if a person is *davening* with *kavana*? How can you tell if his or her actions are informed by Jewish rather than secular concepts and principles? 4) Finally, little or no research exists examining the extent to which actual and potential teaching technologies are successful or unsuccessful.

A certain lack of consensus as to goals and objectives exists even within the Orthodox community, as Yitzhak Goodman's paper (in this volume) reveals; however, the problems of Conservative, Reform, and other liberal Jews are so great as to make the Orthodox community seem uniform by comparison. In non-Orthodox Jewish education it is sometimes possible to reach consensus as to goals, but this consensus is too often attained at the expense of clarity and specificity. A case in point was the publication, several years ago, by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations of the "Ten Goals of Jewish Education," which includes the goals of "affirming one's Jewish identity," "affirming the historic bond to Eretz Yisroel," and "pursuing *tsedek*, *mishpat*, and *chesed*." Indisputable goals — but what do they mean? As soon as an attempt was made to specify their meaning, the debate began. Three years ago a task force was designated to delineate the objectives entailed in each goal. As the documents accumulate, the consensus is eroding. More seriously, it seems now that the resultant document will be so huge and unwieldy as to be unusable in the actual process of making curricular decisions. How is an educator going to choose from among a myriad of concrete objectives? Will a principal or teacher who has not participated in the process of specifying the objectives be able to discern the connections between the disparate objectives, and synthesize them so that class sessions can be more than a series of discrete exercises and drills?

My guess is that the final document, when it appears, will be so cumbersome that some educators will give it a cursory glance and then disregard it completely. Others (the majority, I suspect) will utilize the document as a kind of reference book, and will select from it the objectives they choose to teach. Thus, a decision-

making process which sounds comprehensive, rational, and orderly in theory, can end up being unmanageable, chaotic, and highly subjective in practice.

### **Deweyan Deliberation in Jewish Education**

As stated at the outset, I believe that a Deweyan model of curricular decision-making can be particularly useful to Jewish educators, because it assumes neither agreement on goals nor a large body of research on methods. The Deweyan model requires only one thing — a problem, a conflict, a dissatisfaction or a confusion. A clear definition of goals and objectives and a body of scholarly research bearing on the issues are, of course, useful aids in deliberation, but they are not the starting point, and deliberation can proceed without either, albeit in a less efficient manner. Dewey assumes that the deliberator's goals and objectives may change as a result of his or her investigations and self-scrutiny. As for the consequences of alternative courses of action, such knowledge is always partial and incomplete, and the deliberator must learn to make do with that which is available.

Thus, a Deweyan curricular deliberation would begin with a problem or, more likely, a series of problems: How can one teach a child about the *Akeda*? *Should* one teach about the *Akeda*? Why did God choose to try Abraham by demanding the sacrifice of Isaac? Or, to follow another train of thought, a deliberation might begin by asking why so many students drop out of religious schools after their bar/bat mitzvah, and what might be done about it? Depending upon the deliberator(s) this question might evolve into the relatively simple one of how to plan an appealing program for post bar/bat mitzvah students, or it might lead to even larger issues, such as the failure of the curriculum to suggest viable Jewish adult life-styles, or the failure of the community to present adequate role models. However it started, the deliberation would always end with a tentative solution which would be put into practice.

Deliberating according to Dewey's method is not easy. It is time-consuming, and therefore costly; it requires intensive work on the part of an individual, or relatively small group. It is hard to imagine a deliberation in a group larger than forty, or delibera-

tion in which the participants did not attend regularly and maintain a strong commitment to the group and to the solution of the problem. There are no blueprints for the process, nor any guarantees of a solution; in group deliberations there is no guarantee of consensus. Because the procedure assumes that one's goals, definitions, and even problems will change in the course of deliberation, the evaluation of curricular changes instituted as a result of deliberation is considerably more difficult, though by no means impossible.

The most serious limitation, however, is that the success or failure of a Deweyan deliberation is entirely dependent upon the capabilities of its practitioners. With the more standard model, a certain objectivity, or at least an inter-subjectivity, is presumed, because, as noted above, a high degree of consensus is assumed at every stage. Since Deweyan deliberation is appealing for precisely those areas in which consensus cannot be obtained, a much greater demand is placed upon the individual deliberator(s). To be successful, the deliberator must be expert enough to digest large amounts of disparate data, yet remain open to new conceptualizations and formulations. He or she must walk the fine line between compromise and sell-out, between frankness and diplomacy.

Despite these stringent demands, the deliberator should find the experience involving and exhilarating. Rather than simply performing a task, he or she will be "having an experience," in the fullest possible sense.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the recurrent themes of Jewish educational deliberation has been that of alienation. Both quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that a significant segment of the American Jewish community is alienated from organized Jewish life in general, and from the religious school in particular. Even those who affiliate with synagogues and send their children to religious

13. John Dewey. *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books), 1958 (originally published in 1930).

schools feel alienated from these institutions. According to David Schoem, members of a suburban congregation which he studied identify strongly as Jews, but perceive an immense gap between their own life styles and the mythical "Jewish Way of Life" held up as a model in the religious school.<sup>14</sup> If this community resembles those with which I am familiar, I suspect that a majority of the teachers in the school and probably a majority of the members of the school committee are themselves uncomfortable with this model. Yet they feel (I would guess) that they must have some model to present to their students, and since they lack an alternative model, they continue to utilize this one, fully aware of its inadequacies.

This, in a nutshell, is the problem with the way in which schools, especially religious schools, have traditionally planned their curricula. They have assumed that one must start with the goal, which might, in our case, be summarized as a model for Jewish living. They may have tried to find an authentic, realistic model, but when they failed to do so, they resurrected an outdated one, and hoped no one would notice the discrepancies between what was being taught in school and how everyone — parents, students and teachers — behaved. In fact, of course, everyone noticed, and everyone became increasingly alienated from the school and, by extension, from the congregation. Schoem correctly states that what this community needs is one or several viable models for contemporary Jewish living upon which a new curriculum can be based. But where is even one such model? And, in the absence of an alternative, must one be tied to a conception of curriculum construction that insists upon starting with goals?

The great strength of Deweyan deliberation is that it allows educators to begin with the fact of alienation at the outset, and not wait for a satisfactory set of goals to be articulated. Dewey's assumption would be that if one were to begin with the problem of alienation, the process of deliberation would include an examination of one's ostensible goals, and a search for more satisfactory alternatives. Along the way, one might or might not arrive at

14. David Schoem. "Inside the Classroom: Reflections of a Troubled People," *Jewish Education*, XLVIII (Spring, 1980), pp. 35-41.

such alternatives. But at least no one would be playing games, pretending allegiance to a set of goals for the purpose of maintaining (or even faking) consensus. And one would feel stymied if a model did not emerge. In my own work with alienated and unaffiliated parents, I have found that the very process of deliberation, with the tension it maintains between tradition and change, the past and the present, can itself become a kind of model for how to live a Jewish life.