

## CAN JEWISH EDUCATION BE DE-POLITICIZED?

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*... an existential dilemma [is placed] before the [Jewish education] bureau director. The choice is between becoming increasingly (or remaining) a communal functionary handling the Jewish education portfolio in the political domain or (re-) assuming the role of professional leader in Jewish education.*

There is an obvious implication in the title of these comments: the use of the verb "can" points to the premise held by this writer that the question "should Jewish education be de-politicized?" would have to be answered in the affirmative. This may not necessarily be the prevailing view of all practitioners in the field. For this reason, it may be helpful to dispose of the "should" dimension before embarking on the "can" proposition.

While the term "politics" (derived from the Greek word *polis*) refers primarily to the art or science of government, its secondary or derived meaning has come to denote "partisan or factional intrigue." The practitioner of this art (or science) of politics, the politician, again in the secondary or derived connotation of the term, is described as one "who is interested in personal or partisan gain." The adjective "politic" has come to mean "shrewd, expedient, crafty and unscrupulous."

It is clear that institutional interaction, both inter-institutional and intra-institutional, particularly in the domains of governance, funding and planning, involves elements of "politics," taken in the original connotation of the term. However, as in the realm of government, this art of politics can easily (and indeed does easily) slide from the original meaning to its derivative, i.e. from "proper governing" to "partisan or factional intrigue." And, what is true of the art of politics in general applies to its practitioners as well.

Where does Jewish education interface with "politics"? I suspect that the major nexus lies in social planning on the local and national levels of our organized community. It is my guess that the term "social planning" first made its appearance in the literature of Jewish educators concurrently with the increased involvement of Federations in the funding of the Jewish education endeavor. This funding and the concomitant assumption by Federations of a major responsibility for Jewish education are an epoch-making development in the history of the organized Jewish community in North America and, indeed, of Jewish education itself. This development resulted in the raising of Jewish education to a significant place on the communal agenda. It also raised the level of actual funding (in 1983, Federations allocated 45 million dollars to Jewish education causes!).

Yet, this very development created certain problems, not the least of which has been the excessive politicization of Jewish education. Jewish education which should have been kept above the rough-and-tumble of the communal political game, became part and parcel of this process. Put simply: Jewish education became one of the many social and human service fields which benefit from communal largesse.

Community planning and the setting of funding priorities within the communal structure are governed by the principle of consensus building, a sacred tenet in the philosophy of communal work. Reduced

to its basic elements, consensus building is a process of arriving at a plausible compromise between the diverse and often contending factors (institutional and personal) which make up a particular community's governing body. Give and-take, mutual accommodation, and trade-offs between powerful individuals and institutions are the alpha and omega of this process which, by its very nature, creates possibilities for "politics" in the original as well as the derived senses as defined above. Agency heads of Federation-supported institutions and the lay leaders representing different institutional interests, have thus become experts in this periodic "political" onslaught on the community dollar and on the appropriate share in the communal pie of power and prestige.

The Jewish educator is a relative newcomer to this game. So is, for that matter, the lay leader in Jewish education who, for a variety of sociocultural reasons, has always occupied the lower end on the community's totem pole of prestige (below the lay leader of the community center, of the family service—not to mention the Federation lay leadership itself). The Jewish education professional in the communal domain (i.e. the bureau director) was perhaps, initially, drawn into the political game almost inadvertently by the sheer instinct of self-preservation for survival in this sink-or-swim pool. However, some Jewish education professionals soon began to enjoy the game for its own sake. They abandoned their role of educational statesmen to become communal "politicians" *qua* agency heads representing, as it were, one of the many domains of Jewish social and human services. For Jewish education, this politicization is a case of a missed opportunity: the opportunity of placing Jewish education outside and above the communal political-fiscal-*koved* scramble. It may not be too late to reverse this trend, and this is why I submit the premise that Jewish education *should* be depoliticized.

Can Jewish education be depoliticized? I believe yes, and certainly within limits. The Jewish education professional should, of course, remain an active participant in the social planning process but he should strive to establish a singular position for Jewish education, one that is not subject to inter-institutional rivalry and "politics". If Jewish education is the lifeline for Jewish existence as our lay leaders now aver, then its place in the Jewish community governance should reflect this uniqueness, its "otherness," if you want, from other fields of Jewish social services important as these might be.<sup>1</sup>

This change in direction will require some "sacrifices" on the part of the bureau director:

1. It will require the setting of long-range educational goals for the community, predicated, among other considerations, on a funding design covering a period of many years, thus relinquishing periodic educational spurts of vogue-related projects calling for special funding.

2. It will call for the bureau director's participation in a national planning effort on educational matters and in inter-bureau networking (involving both JESNA and the Bureau Directors Fellowship). This will require that the bureau director resist the temptation of reinventing the wheel in his/her community (the list of "major educational breakthroughs" for which funding is sought locally through the usual political gamesmanship in instances in which such "breakthroughs" have already been developed elsewhere, is miles long!).

3. The bureau director will have to eliminate (or minimally, drastically

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1. On the national level, LCBC recognized the need for depoliticization by awarding JESNA "fair share" funding status which, when fully accepted by local Federations, will eliminate, or minimally drastically reduce, the element of "politics" around the national coordinating and service body in Jewish education.

reduce) involvement in "world saving designs," in which he/she is continually on the road criss-crossing the continent (and/or the Atlantic) solving problems of world-wide import while not having seen the inside of a classroom in his or her community for years.

4. The bureau director will have to redefine his or her position, reducing the politics-oriented component of advocacy in favor of functioning as a Superintendent of Schools (in the sense in which this term and job description have evolved in American public education), i.e. acting as the local statesman of Jewish education and as the actual (not merely titular) head of the local Jewish education system.

Is this depoliticization realistic? I believe it is. It is my considered judgment that most of our high echelon communal leaders, the lay leadership of the bureaus and the Federation professionals, would welcome a depoliticized posture for Jewish education and a redefined (educational)

role for the bureau head. This preference is not always articulated and the reluctance to articulate it is, at times, derived from "political considerations," too.

Of course, there remains the question about the bureau directors themselves: "how you gonna keep her down on the farm after she's been to Paree?" This does indeed place an existential dilemma before the bureau director. The choice is between becoming increasingly (or remaining) a communal functionary handling the Jewish education portfolio in the political domain or (re) assuming the role of a professional leader in Jewish education. *The two are not the same.*

Existential choices are very personal. Those bureau directors who want to remain true to their essential calling know the answer. Those bureau directors who prefer the political rah-rah to the smell of a classroom and to the painful drudgery of educational decision-making will, at long last, unequivocally vote their preference by their work style and priorities.