

Reflections on Israel Scheffler's, *Teachers of My Youth:* *An American Jewish Experience*

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When Harvey Siegel and Al Neiman honored me with an invitation to offer some reflections on Israel Scheffler's book, I pointed out that, as a "fallen" Jew, I was eminently unfit for the job. But they persisted and I relented and am happy I did -- except for the fact that in reading about Scheffler's American Jewish experience, I was attacked once more by feelings of guilt I thought I had finally conquered.

Reading Scheffler reminded me of a life not lived, a road not traveled, notwithstanding the fact that I had set out on the same path at about the same age, eight or nine, and continued until I was 14. There are no doubt many reasons for my defection, but foremost among them, I am sure, was the difference in our respective families. Scheffler's father was ceaselessly vigilant about Israel's Jewish education, always searching for a better teacher, a better school. Moreover he, himself, was steeped in Jewish culture and religion. Neither my father nor my five uncles (my mother's brothers), all of whom lived in the same small city outside of Boston, had acquired anything close to the level of learning enjoyed by Scheffler's father, his grandfather, and his uncle, Shaya, all of whom displayed a deep concern about Israel's Jewish education.

This is not to say that my father or my uncles did not know who they were or rejected their Jewishness, but they were *historical* Jews, not religious Jews. Their Jewish roots were deep, but they had emigrated as young adults to this world to be free of pogroms and to enjoy a "better" life. And their principal concern for their children (there were 23 of us cousins) was that we make a living, marry a Jew, and live a comfortable family life.

I say all this not out of disrespect for my parents and my ten uncles and aunts; they were decent and caring and worked very hard. But it is important to point out that, even though I envy Scheffler's experience, it was but one kind of American Jewish experience, and its fullness and depth depended so much on the circumstances in which he lived. As he points out:

The work of the teachers I have recounted here could never have been effective without the supporting religious culture of Jewish families and the pervasive presence of Jewish communities and institutions for which Jewish learning had the highest metaphysical status, intrinsic value, the character of religious worship, as well as the reliability to serve as practical guide in all spheres of life (p. 173).

But, ironically, though none of us 23 cousins, except possibly myself, obtained anything but a cursory Jewish education -- for the boys just enough literacy to go through the ritual of bar mitzvah and for the girls practically nothing -- many of us encouraged our children to immerse themselves in Jewish culture and to study Hebrew. Those children -- the second generation -- in many cases became fluent in Hebrew, active in Jewish youth groups, and made their pilgrimages to Israel to work in a kibbutz. Some even composed their own services for the Passover seder. Despite all this, as far as I can tell, those experiences had no more permanence than my own. Perhaps this is a reflection of a problem with Jewish education and Judaism itself, a problem Scheffler suggests cries out for a philosophic examination. Thus:

Jewish teachers of today cannot, by and large, rely on a religious family culture, nor on an authoritative Jewish community....It is commonly said that education is a reflection of its society. Contemporary Jewish

education has the task of creating the very society of which it should be the reflection. Not only must it interpret the received texts, it needs to reinterpret the very conditions of its role, assess the new situation and invent unprecedented methods for meeting it. A repetitive application of traditional approaches will not suffice. There is no substitute for philosophy in this context -- a rethinking of the bases of Jewish life and learning in our times (p. 173).

Scheffler's suggestion is obviously a "tall order," especially in a society which exercises impressive assimilating and homogenizing power and which at best tolerates pluralism -- religious or otherwise -- and at worst is openly hostile to it. Moreover, what Scheffler says about the need for contemporary Jewish education to create "the very society of which it should be a reflection" could well be said about contemporary American education and American society. What kind of society do we want? And what kind of education should we pursue for the purpose of creating that society? The fact that these are currently compelling questions makes the problem of Jewish education in America even more troublesome. I would like to say a word about this.

In light of the recent turn of events in politics, one could conclude that all the legislation of the past six decades, all the laws designed to reduce social inequalities and social injustices were not able to guarantee a "kinder and gentler" society. This is not to say that laws are worthless any more than we can say that the "received texts," referred to by Scheffler, are worthless. But texts and laws are limited in value without an understanding and appreciation of what they symbolize. No text, no law, no rule, no principle, has universal and independent meaning. Their meaning will evolve from continuous reexamination of them, from an exploration of their possibilities in light of our collective values, understandings, and commitments. This is no less true for an autobiography, including Scheffler's. For an autobiography is a history and, as such, constitutes a selective recounting of a personal perception of what occurred, and made coherent by a unique and peculiar set of understandings, values, visions, and, no doubt, some delusions. As the neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, put it recently: "We are not given the world; we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection."¹

All this is nothing new, of course, but it highlights what Scheffler is driving at when he calls for a "rethinking of the bases of Jewish life and learning in our times," and when he is critical of the "inadequate attention to philosophical issues in [his] own Jewish education."

And as far as the level of schooling appropriate for philosophy is concerned, I am inclined to deviate from the traditional attitude reserving the subject for the higher levels only. In part, this is because I believe that our youth already receive quite sophisticated educations at early levels, and are capable of much more. In part, too, my reason is that the mind abhors a philosophical vacuum. No philosophy means bad philosophy. Sacred texts taught without a philosophical attitude are in danger of being received either as literal but incredible dogma, or as mere fairy tale, or as nonsense to be repeated with a pious incomprehension that will not survive adult reflection. Certainly there are degrees of sophistication which must be apportioned suitably to the levels of maturity of the pupils. But adult teachers need to be philosophically prepared to provide at least tentative explanations upon demand, to respond to serious questions as to how this or that text is to be taken, even if such response consists only in further questions. Philosophy is in this sense no luxury but a vital necessity for cultural survival (p. 174).

My own Jewish education was no doubt limited by a more or less disinterested family and community, and eventually it dried up from disuse. But it was also devoid of any philosophic orientation which might have given it life and meaning rather than being, to use Scheffler's words, "mere fairy tale or nonsense to be repeated with a pious incomprehension." This description applies as well to much of my *public* schooling and, I dare say, the kind of schooling common today. But worse, it is the kind of education which is actively encouraged -- and even mandated -- by educational policymakers including legislators, governors, and even presidents as they persist in their pursuit of the narrowest of educational goals. I need not elaborate at length on this matter to this audience, but I must allude to it. Notwithstanding my years of exposure to the polemic about test scores, I was still shocked recently as I read the *1994 National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners*. The very first line of the very first chapter is a quote from the

football coach, Vince Lombardi, "If you're not keeping score, you're just practicing." And the first paragraph reads:

In any sport, it is difficult to determine how well your team is doing unless you have complete, accurate, and up-to-date information on the team's performance. If you want to determine your team's standing and see how far you are from first place, you also need measures that allow you to compare your team to the very best in the league. Most important, if you expect to win, then all players must work cooperatively to achieve common goals.

And later:

Public dissatisfaction with low levels of student performance, increasing global economic competition, and consistently poor showings on international assessments led policymakers to conclude five years ago that the United States had been spending too much time merely practicing and had not devoted sufficient attention to improving performance.

Whether in such a political-educational climate it is possible for teachers to think about the bases of American democracy and to provide their students with educational experiences such that they will be disposed toward creating a more democratic, a more just society is problematic. Yet teachers, in my view, have no choice; if they are to be true to the profession, they must try. And those of us who teach teachers have an obligation to help them. We would all do well to heed George Counts's challenge, and John Dewey's, and Israel Scheffler's, and provide an opportunity to students to acquire those philosophic understandings and moral sensibilities so that, at the very least, they would be armed to resist the kind of mean spirited politics and the nonsensical education which currently prevail.

When I began thinking about how to approach this talk, I had considered a number of humorous stories about my Jewish background and Jewishness itself. Harvey did ask me to throw in a little humor and, after all, if one listens to Denis Phillips, I have a reputation to live up to. But, somehow, in the writing, I took off in a direction I had not anticipated. Yet I feel I should conclude with something to accommodate Harvey and perhaps not disappoint Denis.

Many Jews, as you know, have changed their names for social and business purposes. For example, my father's name was Brownstein when he came to this country as a young man. As he was preparing to open his first bookbindery, he petitioned the court to lop off the "stein." But, of course, he paid the price as have I, on occasion, of having to answer questions from the curious. My father should have looked to Mr. Goldstein for guidance. Mr. Goldstein had his name changed to O'Flaherty. The following year he applied to have his name changed to O'Leary. The judge thought he had seen O'Flaherty before and asked him if he had previously been in his court. "Yes," O'Flaherty replied, "last year when I had my name changed from Goldstein to O'Flaherty." "But why," the judge asked, "do you now want to change your name to O'Leary?" "Well, your honor, when someone asks me what my name was before, I will be able to say O'Flaherty."

There is a Yiddish expression my mother was fond of: "Man tracht und Got lacht." Man thinks and God laughs. A humbling thought. Perhaps the God in them has enabled Jews to laugh in the presence of pain and absurdity. In any case, if you want to read a delightful story about God laughing (with joy) because His scholarly sons defeated Him in intellectual combat, do read the last three pages of Scheffler's book. The story illustrates a central argument of Scheffler, that interpretation is an integral part of the Torah and, as he says, "not even the Lord of the Universe has the final word in interpretation of his Word" (p. 185). How wonderfully Jewish!

1. In Wendy Lesser's review of Sack's, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, *New York Times*, Sunday, 19 Feb. 1995, Book Review Supplement, 1.

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