

JEWISH THOUGHT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND GOALS

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Why study Jewish thought? Among the questions posed to the contributors to this symposium, this was the central question. What is the value of this entire enterprise?

My personal perspective is that the answer to this question revolves around two fundamental axes—meaning and complexity. These are the two essential values that lie at the heart of this discipline. These two concepts are central to an individual's living a purposeful life, as well as to our creating a thriving culture and society.

The pursuit of meaning is central to the discipline of Jewish thought. I chose to major in philosophy in college, instead of literature, because of the following realization. While literature dealt with big ideas, it also dealt with form as well as content, and therefore its study involved not only the pursuit of truths but also analysis of style and structure; in addition, with the concept of “art for art's sake,” and with the increasing popularity of deconstructionism, pursuit of objective meaning receded farther into the background. Philosophy, on the other hand (at least in the curriculum of the time), dedicated itself purely to the pursuit of the ideas themselves. In my philosophy classes, we were involved in the search for truth and meaning, as well as the attempt to cut to the core ideas upon which we build our values, our interpersonal interactions, our communities, and our culture.

This endeavor cannot be achieved without the second principle I mentioned, which serves as the tool enabling this discovery of truth and meaning through intellectual excavation and thoughtful sharpening of ideas, which is the ability to think complexly. Studying philosophy entails learning how to evaluate ideas, see nuance, and understand the interplay between opposing or dialectical truths. In addition, one learns either to hone the arguments and ideas on each side until the dialectical concepts can coexist without contradiction, or to hold seemingly contradictory values at the same time, recognizing the contribution of each, and maintaining the tension between them. These tools, the thinking skills that are

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developed through the study of Jewish thought, ultimately become a life-long gift.

These two values are foundational and necessary, now more than ever. We are living in a time when, it seems, the world is suffering from two major difficulties—lack of meaning and lack of awareness of complexity and of critical thinking. The world is drowning in the twin challenges of ever-increasing relativistic perspectives and of shallow and facile thinking. This has, among other things, contributed to a precipitous decline in the type of civil discourse that generates greater insight and understanding. Emphasizing both the profound significance of the pursuit of meaning, as well as the importance of the skill set of complex and nuanced thinking, would be a healthy step forward.

When discussing these issues with a good friend, she argued that the *shakla ve-tarya*, the give and take of traditional talmudic discourse, could hold the key to what is sorely lacking in the public arena in our time. The ability to apply a critical eye to each issue, question everything, and subsequently have the inner fortitude to come to a firmly held conclusion that is richer, more nuanced, and more accurate because it had been challenged by another perspective is what the talmudic tradition offers the world today. Through it a person is enabled to plant his or her flag firmly in a specific camp and yet at the same time to see validity in many perspectives.

Editing this symposium and thinking about the issues raised by the contributors has convinced me that this is perhaps even more true in the realm of Jewish thought. Study of Jewish thought provides us with these crucial cognitive skills and perspectives. In addition, its subject matter and the myriad and diverse questions it raises and seeks to answer engage us in the pursuit of truth and meaning. Ultimately, the field of Jewish thought is grounded in the most meaningful and important issue of all—what it means to be an *oved* or *ovedet Hashem*.

In order to gain a richer understanding of this discipline, symposium authors were asked the following questions:

1. Jewish thought is a term that is often used to encompass many inter-related, yet distinct, disciplines. These include academic Jewish philosophy and *Mahashevet Yisrael*, and, in addition, disciplines such as *musar*, *aggada*, mysticism, *hasidut*, and others. When teaching Jewish thought, what texts do you utilize, what areas of Jewish tradition do you draw from, and why? What role do sources from *Hazal*, medieval, or modern Jewish philosophy, or other religious or traditional sources play in your teaching?

2. In terms of your personal experience, why do you choose to be involved in this field? How does it speak to you personally, philosophically, religiously, and spiritually? What about your students? What are your educational goals when teaching this material? On what level do you attempt to engage your students—intellectual, personal, philosophical, spiritual? What have you found to be the most challenging aspect of this work? How and why have those challenges changed or evolved over your career as an educator?
3. In the field of Jewish thought, what do you see as the needs and challenges of the moment? Are there contemporary movements that you believe should affect the content or the approach to teaching Jewish thought today? What is the interplay between current trends, such as neo-*hasidut*, postmodern thought, or others, and Jewish thought? How have these movements affected the field? What should be the appropriate response to these emerging trends?

Some contributors addressed all the questions, while others related to only one or two points of interest. David Shatz provides thoughtful and valuable answers to the above questions, based on years of expert experience in the university classroom. Yitzchak Blau similarly provides a cogent perspective on the overall value of engaging in the study of this discipline.

Some contributions are deeply autobiographical, others more didactic. I found it striking, however, that all of the responses revolved in some way, around the two axes I identified above, meaning and complexity. The interplay between the various ideas developed in the essays is fascinating to observe.

For example, David Bashevkin presents an impassioned plea to view Jewish thought as a tool to find and create personal meaning in one's life and service of God, and to expand our perspective so that as much as possible of what we encounter in our religious study and our experience falls under that rubric. In contrast, Yoel Finkelman extols the value of developing the capacity to think critically and embrace complexity as the most important element in his experience of teaching Jewish thought. Yosef Bronstein's autobiographical description of how exposure to Jewish thought provided a gateway to meaning in his own life and how this has informed his teaching, combined with an allegiance to methodological complexity and rigor, provides a window into how the two axes interact in his teaching. Daniel Rynhold similarly provides an autobiographical perspective into how both meaning and complexity drew him to this field and to the values that he identifies and strives to uphold in his teaching. Another

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window is provided by Netanel Weiderblank's explication of how, what, and why he chooses to teach Jewish thought, with an emphasis on how the study of this discipline affects the spiritual and religious experience of his students.

Other contributors focused strongly on contemporary issues. Julie Goldstein explains how her teaching takes into account the worldview that today's students bring with them into the classroom, and how her approach is tailored to enabling her students to find meaning and connection within the current intellectual climate. Miriam Feldmann Kaye describes how a postmodern perspective can be incorporated into the classic discipline of Jewish thought.

With an eye on the Israeli educational scene, Cheryl Berman calls upon educators to do a better job, providing models of past thinkers who have used Jewish thought to meet the challenges of their time, and urging us to learn from them by meeting the unique needs of the present day. Dov Singer takes a completely different approach to the same issue, arguing for an overhaul of the whole enterprise of the study of Jewish thought, replacing it with an experiential approach which seems to be influenced by modern approaches such as neo-*hasidut*.

Now, more than ever, the serious study of Jewish thought, both for its content—the serious exploration of intellectual, ethical, religious, and spiritual values and ideas—and for the critical skills it engenders in us and our students, is invaluable. It is inspiring to see that so many contemporary teachers are considering these issues with thoughtfulness, dedication, and commitment.

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