

THE ARTS IN THE JEWISH DAY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The arts should be an important part of Jewish day school education, but complex issues arise when a day school attempts to institute a rigorous arts program that is evaluated for excellence of artistic accomplishment rather its instrumentality in the school. The teacher is the key element to the success of arts programs. The teacher must be a practicing artist, Jewishly committed, available to the students beyond the scope of the school day, and must be a core member in the school community.



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I. Introduction

There are two approaches to the teaching of arts in the Jewish Day School. The simple addition of separate courses in music, creative writing, dance, film, drama, painting, and art history will enliven the student day and provide tuneful and colorful assemblies, but it will not teach any art at a level above that of the dilettante. If a school simply wants to provide an outlet for student creativity, let it provide an hour or two a week for music or drawing. If the education committee or some other curriculum setting body of a Jewish day school decides to teach the arts seriously, to make the arts a central and crucial part of education, and to make them integral to Jewish education, this committee must also recognize the inadequacy of such an approach and face the major changes in the day school program that such a decision requires. It may also, in all but very large schools, have to make a decision on what arts to teach.

My fourteen-year experience in Jewish day schools teaching English, creative writing, Jewish history, and philosophy has convinced me that the arts can be taught, can become a vital and liberating elements in student lives, and can reach high aesthetic levels. My own students have written poems and stories of publishable quality, and a few have indeed been published. Many have decided on careers in writing and have been successful in university writing workshops. In this essay I wish to present a model of arts teaching, my own *per fas et nefas*, and attempt to draw some limited conclusions from it. My examples are taken entirely from high school experience, but may be

applicable, with suitable modification, to middle or lower school settings.

The elements out of which an arts program at a Jewish day school must be formed are: a decision to have arts in the school; an art or arts; a teacher or teachers; students; a milieu. I shall deal with these in order. As will be clear, the teacher is surely the most important of these elements.

II. Why Art? Why Jewish Art?

The need for beauty—however defined and however useless—is universal. Beauty is, of course, available outside of school. Many students want to take music and art classes, to attend movies, plays, and concerts of various kinds. The Jewish day school with its double curriculum makes such outside activities difficult to take in, and so the school usually undertakes to replace some of them with curricular activities in the arts. In doing so, the Jewish day school only imitates the offerings of public schools, many of which are not replacements for lost opportunities but enrichment for culturally deprived student populations.

We expect that somehow these courses will acquire a Jewish aura, perhaps by atmospheric adhesion. And we are surprised when many of our students, and among them often the most talented and committed to art, resist the inclusion of any Jewish content. (Choirs are an exception. Students associate choirs with synagogue services. There does tend to be considerably more interest in

* I am indebted to my children Idit and Eitan, whose insights, patience and responses over the past ten years have helped me formulate the ideas presented here

singing in a choir than listening to one.) But poetry writing based on *midrash* goes nowhere; paintings based on Jewish ritual are recognized as *kitsch*; music on supposedly Jewish themes tends either towards the raucous (Carlebach influenced, perhaps) or the lugubrious. The other arts suffer similarly.

Many years ago, a student of mine who was enrolled in my Jewish thought class remonstrated with me saying in effect that "Jewish thought" was the equivalent of absurdly saying "Canadian mathematics." This is not accurate, but there is something to it. Similarly, students wish to make art, not Jewish art.

If students are given two hours a week to make art, they accomplish little. What little they do make is praised extravagantly, but the gifted students are embarrassed by this; they know we who praise are either dishonest or ignorant. Or, far worse, they may believe us, in which case we possibly have done serious damage to a developing sense of taste and judgment. The walls of the school become large refrigerator doors, on which doting parents will put anything. Teachers and administrators express regret at the failure of students to listen carefully to other students' music. But they are criticizing manners rather than judgment.

People who have heard this before point out that our students are not artists (at least not yet) or that even the semblance of artistic achievement adds greatly to the environment of the school. They add that art must be open to all students and that insistence on excellence in product—rather than eagerness in production—is harmful to the egos of the less talented. There is some obvious truth in this, yet the result is mediocrity. I have seen superb student work, listened to excellent student music, read poems and stories of fine sensibility and style. Perhaps the arts might be offered on two levels: one for those willing to make the serious effort that producing quality requires, and one for those who prefer to dabble.

But what is Jewish art? It is art that emerges naturally out

of the experience of being Jewish. It both defines that experience and is defined by it. Like most great art, Jewish art will more criticize than celebrate the culture that frames it. Sometimes the criticism will be harsh and uncomfortable for the sponsoring institution. (It is easy to imagine a school sorry it has initiated a real arts program, or to imagine a school insisting on celebration. I have experienced this painfully, because people who have devoted themselves to the community are accused of ingratitude and lack of judgment.) A highly critical art should be taken seriously. Obviously, criticism should be neither defamatory nor obscene.

It is tempting for an institution to encourage art that only celebrates the institution or that celebrates Judaism. Schools may want to instrumentalize art, to use painting as decoration, music as liturgy, or writing as public relations. This results in bad art, pointless art. Art may be Jewish, but despite certain romantic claims, it is not religion. The distinction between art and religion must be rigorously maintained, or an overemotional religion and a sentimentalized art will rapidly turn people away from both. Perhaps it is enough to argue against an ugly Judaism, a Judaism uninformed by the imagination. Judaism without art is possible; Judaism with art is desirable. But real art—real Jewish art—is not in any way dependent on the goodness of the Judaism experienced by the artist. As in all art, what is needed is the artistic conviction that the subject (in this case, Judaism) matters, and that one is free to approach it, pen or brush or chisel in hand, courageously, freely, and without consideration of what the non-artistic audience makes of it.

The Jewish day school that wants a serious arts program must accept the results of that program. Its students already take Judaism seriously, and they must be assured that Judaism is neither a subject to be sentimentalized nor a subject that is taboo.

III. *Which Art?*

It should not matter on which art or arts a school decides to concentrate. Yet it does matter for a number of reasons. A school without the facilities to stage dramas might not want to offer more than a school-play-level of acting courses. A school with a hundred students altogether will not be able to assemble a symphony orchestra. Financial considerations may rule out a film making course that attempts anything more than clever video. Painting and sculpture, to be serious, require extensive and permanent studio space. Money will also be a restraint in hiring teachers. Ten arts teachers, each offering a course or two, will be a financial burden for which the school will not receive much in the form of well-educated students in these arts.

Student interest, i.e. the particular interests of those students actually in attendance at the school, should be important in choosing which art to teach. A school at which thirty students are fascinated by jazz should have jazz ensembles. Yet taking student interest into account, the main concern should be the danger of trivializing art. A jazz ensemble that practices an hour a week after school is unlikely to play important music. I have taught creative writing classes that met once a week on a come-one-come-all basis. Nothing worthwhile came out of these.

Perhaps mini-courses, offered in ninth grade, would help students identify fields of interest. In fact, students in ninth grade, at least those most likely to attend private schools, have already found artistic areas they want to engage in, and probably do engage in. Younger students will need more guidance. My creative writing group comprises students who have shown interest in and aptitude for writing in ninth grade or tenth grade English classes. But my point here is not to suggest in which arts to specialize so much as to warn against a scattering of resources. (Creative writing requires no resources but teachers; drawing and painting require space; music

requires instruments and a sound-buffered space; cinema requires cameras and equipment, etc.)

IV. *The Teacher*

A. Results

The teacher is paramount, for if any of the arts is to receive more than an inadequate two hours a week of the curriculum, and if the art is to be both at a high level and Jewish, the teacher must make time for art and students. This inevitably means evenings, weekends and vacations. The teacher also must be dedicated to the Jewish experience. Crucially, the teacher must be a practitioner at a professional level of the art being taught. But far beyond this, the teacher must understand and pursue face-to-face encounters with the students so that each is met as a person who is different from and even able to command the teacher.

The discussion which follows is one that makes excellence in the arts in the Jewish day school possible. It is based on my own experience, and on long discussions with other teachers, with my wife, Susann (who is head of the Hebrew department at The New Jewish High School of Greater Boston), with Stephen Horenstein (a great musician and teacher of music), with other colleagues, and with many of the young men and women in our classes. It is also heavily influenced by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the French-Jewish thinker whose work opened for me entire worlds of knowledge about religion and human relationships. It also owes much to a four-year program of careful weekly reading of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*.¹

I present a model based on the art of writing, but I am assuming the model could hold for any art not absolutely dependant on a particular space or massive equipment. I am a poet and have published a book of poetry, *The Voyage to Gaza*, as well as poems in Israeli, British, and American journals. I have a library that includes some

¹I gratefully acknowledge Rabbi Eliezer Cohen of Oak Park, Michigan, whose acuity and wisdom aided me in working through Rosenzweig's text.

nine hundred volumes of poetry. A teacher should not ask his class to do what the teacher cannot, although this is frequently the case in high school art classes. It is necessary that the teacher of any art be a practitioner of that art. When, recently, the opportunity arose to hire an additional teacher, I was delighted to suggest to the administration a young poet, Sean Singer, who has since won the Yale Younger Poets prize. Among the tasks of an ongoing commitment to the arts is developing a faculty.

The teacher must meet his or her students and this requires a long time. Classes must be small and their number should be limited. At the school at which I teach and whose headmaster is determined to include the arts in the curriculum, a full position requires that teachers meet four classes, three times a week each. Classes average fifteen students. (Other duties include counseling, proctoring, many meetings, and more, some of them only peripherally related to students.) Real learning in the arts is performed elsewhere.

I will describe where I've gotten thus far. If this is not the aim of the program, it does not matter how it was achieved. If it is, the reader may follow the discussion of methodology afterwards.

On a recent weekend, when the students were on vacation, six students (in addition to my own two children) gathered at my home for *Shabbat*. The previous week I had bought the collected poetry of Czeslaw Milosz, received poetry magazines in the mail, and was reading Albert Goldbarth's *Saving Lives*. I had printed a New York Times book review of Brodsky's *Nativity Poems*. Students brought stories and poems they had written that week, and I presented a few poems I had written that week. We sang *Shabbat* songs, and talked both about *Shabbat* and about writing. I spoke of alienation of the Jewish writer, and of the non-Jews Milosz and Nabokov. We were amused that, in a review of Brodsky's work that concentrated on his alienation as a Russian writer in New York, not a word was written about the alienation inherent in that Jewish poet writing nativity poems. After synagogue

on *Shabbat* morning, others joined us and we continued the discussion. There were no lessons and no class, no homework and no assignments. There was some critical reading and suggestions were made about reworking texts after *Shabbat*. After a short nap and *havdalah*, most of the students went to a movie.

A similar scene, sometimes with a larger number of students, occurs most weekends at our house. Sometimes other faculty members join us. Every Tuesday night from 8:00 to 10:00 PM, student writers gather there for a workshop in writing. This is not an official extra-curricular activity; no one pays to attend or is paid to host. No attendance is taken and no one is turned away, yet all understand that no one comes Tuesday night who has not been invited. In addition to the usual workshop activities—critiques of work in progress—the group has undertaken a resurrection of the poetry of Berl Pomeranz, a Polish-Jewish poet killed by the Germans in 1942. A neighbor showed my wife the poetry, which was beautiful but written in difficult pre-Israeli Hebrew. Many members of the group are engaged in rendering this into good English poetry. In the process, they are also learning much about Jewish life in the 1920s and 1930s in central Europe, but that is not, of course, the objective.

Altogether, about thirty-five students have participated in the workshops. (Homework and teenage social life prevent completely regular attendance for many students.) Approximately twenty other students have come for weekends. In a school with two hundred twenty students, this represents a sizable percentage. Some of these people come from far away. There is no cost to the school for this program. My wife and I joyfully supply soft drinks and snack food.

There is considerable carry-over from these sessions to the time actually spent in school. The atmosphere in class is friendly and relaxed, and those who have participated in the writing sessions start discussions, which other students readily join. Writing is recognized as a crucial human activity with both ethical and aesthetic elements.

References in class to Judaism are accepted as integral to learning English language and literature, rather than examples of the school fostering its own agenda. Because other faculty members often take part, these *desiderata* also take place in classes other than my own, and in courses other than English.

B. Methods

My purpose in September is to meet my students. I do not mean that I set out to learn their names or to determine their level of academic preparation, although I of course do so. Rather, I meet each one willing to meet me privately after class or in the hallways. (We have no offices, but even if we did they would be questionably efficient places to meet.) I meet my students as people, not simply as students. In other words, I insist that Sam must respond as Sam, Rachel as Rachel. I set the genus "student" aside. This is not easy: It means also setting aside the genus "teacher" while still maintaining dignity and commanding respect. One respects Sam or Rachel and is exquisitely careful to maintain the dignity of each.

I do not know if this can be taught. Certainly, it cannot be taught as a set of learned behaviors. Levinas refers to this, and were this a scholarly paper, I would fill these pages with footnotes. One must see Rachel defenseless, and Sam in all of his vulnerability. The teacher needs to set aside all of his or her own wants, including the desire to educate, in order simply to listen to the child. Only the person I face can have an agenda; I must not.

In practice this means that if Rachel has written a paper about cars, I talk to her about cars, not about writing. If she has written a paper mocking people who have inexpensive cars, I do not offer a lesson in humility and human decency. These things—bad writing or bad economics—are not Rachel. After a few such talks and after we have also gotten to know one another in the give and take of class discussion, I shall invite Rachel and a few other students for Shabbat. I find that after a short time of consistently inviting students, I have acquired a posi-

tive reputation and students such as Rachel agree to join us. Even when I first realized that I could teach this way, not too many invitations were required before people accepted. The word spread that weekends at our house were both relaxing and stimulating—and the food was good. We keep a traditional Sabbath, yet allow people to sleep late and not attend synagogue, if that is their preference. We do not drive on *Shabbat*, yet we allow the freedom to come and go.

At the house we speak of writing and writers, religion and philosophy, aesthetics and ethics. The family is "functional," and we talk freely to each other and to the subject of conversation. We help each other. I suggest these be prerequisites for teaching arts at a Jewish day school, and not simply be assumed. People must want to be a part of what the teachers present, not represent. We cannot always do this. Sometimes we are tired; sometimes we need time to ourselves; sometimes we need time to withdraw into ourselves. On such occasions, only advanced students are invited, people who know us well.

Rachel knows, as does Sam and her other classmates, that when I find a paper, a poem, a story or a script worthy of serious interest, I may invite the author to the Tuesday night workshop. My main consideration in this high school setting is that a person not be required to subject his work to criticism when the artist simply will not bear such scrutiny. I want no one embarrassed.

A few problems inevitably arise. Some of my colleagues who consider themselves "progressive" accuse me and those who join me of elitism. This should not be an impediment, as long as the work and meetings take place off campus and are not official extracurricular activities. This is the concomitant. (Analogously, not everyone gets a lead part in a school play, nor starts on the basketball team.) Far more serious problem are the demands such an approach makes on the teacher and his or her family. I have been rightly told that this model is inapplicable to many teachers, for it requires a large place for meeting, that the teacher lead a densely Jewish life and be actively

pursuing an art, and finally, that the teacher be willing and able to do these things independent of any pedagogic purpose.

An aside: The teacher described here must not be charismatic. The purpose is always the making of art and Jewish community. Students must follow their own interests and purpose, their own art, and not be seduced by the interests, purposes and art of a charismatic leader.

Above all, the teacher must have humility regarding time. The people befriended are given the right to make inordinate demands on the teacher's time. The student's work is primary, and this means that sometimes the teacher must stop his activity when a student asks for his time. This means papers are sometimes graded late, and that the teacher's own creative work is sometimes set aside. I find however, that people are considerate more often than not. A greater problem occurs when a student attempts to make the teacher his parent. Some students have difficult parents and understandably seek substitutes, and this must be avoided. Parents quite rightly judge, but the relationship between artists is, except where art is concerned, nonjudgmental. Other students need the teacher as a friend, and this can be done carefully. I remain in close contact with students who have not been in my classes for a decade and more.

Of course, this model is not peculiar to the arts. I have known teachers of German, Talmud and English literature who enriched their students' lives and greatly increased their students' knowledge in such fashion. But it seems it is a model essential to the arts in the Jewish day school, since there is insufficient time during school to accomplish much of value.

In summary and in an attempt to generalize what is in fact a highly personal account: The teacher must be an artist. The teacher needs to have leisure to create and leisure to meet students. The teacher must be deeply engaged in Judaism, and must have personal commitments to the students who he or she encounters in and out of class.

C. Staffing

The music teacher who has two sections as a part time job cannot be the teacher described above. That teacher is running from workplace to workplace, somehow accumulating the money needed for living. In high-expense areas (such as Boston) even a full time position may pay less than needed, and many of my colleagues have additional evening classes in the area.

If the arts are to flourish, arts teachers must be able to devote themselves completely to the students in their classes and make themselves available to people interested in the arts. There are ways to accomplish this. The arts teacher who teaches two classes may be given administrative duties. He or she may be placed in charge of a wide range of extracurricular activities. Money may even be raised with the goal of establishing residencies in the arts. Somehow, the teacher must be provided the time and income such that he or she can afford this. No one is going to learn sculpture from a teacher who is at school two hours a week and has no time to speak leisurely with students, or to meet in depth the other people at the school.

Hiring such teachers is difficult. The artist hired must already be engaged in the activities described above or eager to be so engaged. The administration must go beyond the professionalism generally sought and concentrate on people for whom both teaching and artistic production are vocations. The teacher's family needs to support and enable such community. The teachers must be people for whom this is life, not just a job. Life and necessity are not steps towards something else, and the teacher should consider this work as his highest position.

Under practical pressures, there is an understandable tendency in staffing to fill slots, to make certain before anything else is considered that all courses will be offered and will be taught by people with the proper degrees and credentials and experience. It would be better not to offer a program in the arts unless a teacher similar to the one I have described here is available. This means that searches

may take a year or two, and conditions of employment may have to be personalized and arranged in nontraditional ways. If so, the results will come.

As I write this, I have received notice that a former student of mine, Miri Gilad from Beer Sheva, has published new poems. I remember her fondly, as well as the publication of her first book that she wrote in Hebrew after taking my courses in writing and poetry. I am as happy for her as I ever am over any of my own writing, and this is necessary. All of this may sound impossible; yet it is actual.

V. *The Students*

A. Who They Are

Not every student relates to the arts in general, or to any particular art. Some students cannot comprehend investment in art that pays no readily materializable return. Others simply lack ability, although it is rare that a person will have no talent for any art at all. In a dual-curriculum, high-quality Jewish day school, more students lack the requisite time. Such people may be convinced that art is as important as achieving all A's on a report card, but generally not until tenth or eleventh grades. Some students are so suspicious of faculty (or perhaps any adult) interest in them that they cannot speak (or write) freely and honestly. Yet when taken together, such students are a minority.

Most of the remaining students do nothing particularly interesting in any art. Often bad paintings are painted and praised; bad music is written and played and lauded; bad writing is produced and approved. Many of those people who attend Tuesday night and *Shabbat* sessions write extremely well, but they spend the requisite time and assign the requisite importance to their writing. Our school is fortunate in having an excellent drama teacher who elicits fine performances from students, but time permits training students only for particular roles, not teaching them what acting is. Many students are aware of

this mediocrity. Some, alas, are taken in by the praise and then resist real criticism. Such students are usually lost to art even if temporarily.

An interesting phenomenon is the student "hanger-on." Any number of people come on Tuesday nights or *Shabbat* who do not write. Some have been invited as writers, but have lost interest in writing, have no time to write, would rather be engaged in another art, are interested in the Judaic but not the artistic elements of the experience, or simply enjoy the community. I encourage such students to continue to come. There is, after all, more to life than art, and they provide an audience—and artists need the opportunity to educate an appreciative audience. People who have been writing with us for years naturally tend to stay in touch after graduation. Frequently, on vacations from college or after college, they attend Tuesday nights or Sabbaths when they are in the area. But the hangers-on do also, and I welcome them as warmly. On a recent *Shabbat*, five former students from Michigan, New York and Massachusetts visited; only one is a writer. This is an ongoing Jewish community that has been gathering members for many years. The Jewish community is not necessarily dependent on geographic closeness or on frequent meeting. The community of Jews, like the community of artists, includes many members who are dead. There is an ongoing dialogue among rabbis living and dead, as there is among writers past and present.

B. Love

The community is based on love. The relationships within the community are not, of course, in any way erotic, even if two members have romantic feelings towards each other outside the community. I use "love" as Levinas used it, i.e. in the sense of people who recognize a selfless responsibility for other people. I am responsible for the good of each member of the group without regard for any benefit I may derive from the other person or from the group. There is no short way to explain this, and I refer the interested reader to Levinas' essay "Substitution."

VI. *The Milieu*

The school, and particularly the school administration, must support excellence in the arts. This excellence in the arts must be valued as highly as academic excellence. Schools need to move away from praising simple activity, the appearance of creativity. Thus, students who want to take no part in the production of art or have demonstrated a lack of ability to produce art should be encouraged to take art history classes or classes in music appreciation.

Somehow the school must also find a way to reward the large amount of time the arts faculty will spend with students away from the school. This is difficult to quantify and may be highly variable. Schools should provide forums at which excellent art is presented. These must not be open to whoever feels like presenting something he or she has done. The school's literary magazine must be selective, and publication in it a just source of pride. Art should be hung on walls or in classrooms only if it has high aesthetic merit. Student music should be played only when it does not sound like student music.

Artists in the school community should be provided with adequate meeting space. Should they feel the need, they should be excused from class on occasion, as student ath-

letes are now. If possible, they should be allowed to take classes together even in non-art courses, because they will have points of view about these courses that they will want to share and discuss. Schools should recognize that, whereas no student is likely to make an academic breakthrough in physics or history, young people can and do produce art of great merit. These artists must be treated as productive adults, not mere apprentices. It should also be recognized that the discipline of the arts will sometimes take precedence over more usual forms of discipline, and an artist in school must be allowed to shape his or her schedule and work ethic. Many school administrations will find this difficult, but the alternative in practice is often that the young artist feels alienated from the school and eventually leaves it, either willingly or at the school's insistence.

VII. *Conclusion*

Given the students and teachers depicted here, art will happen in the Jewish day school. More art and better art will happen if the rest of the terms are met. By far the greatest difficulty is finding teachers. A school that then treasures and cares for such teachers will keep them, and the school will flourish in Judaism, in criticism and in celebration.