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THE Arts in JEWISH EDUCATION

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Perspective on Jewish Education

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The
Lookstein
Center
for Jewish Education

Art and Authenticity

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David Debow examines some conceptual underpinnings of art and the religious experience, and suggests an understanding of the interface between them.



Life class in progress at the "Bezalel" art school in Jerusalem, 1950. Photo: Teddy Brauner, GPO.

Consider the following conversation in the Art Studio:

Student: What's wrong with this painting?
I just can't get it to work. It's a total cliché.

Teacher: True. I see it too. The elements are there. But you are working by rote. Falling back on old patterns. You are just following the instructions for the exercise. I don't see you anywhere in this painting.

Student: I don't feel connected at all. It's trite, pat, superficial. There is just nothing happening on this canvas.

Teacher: Not nothing. Here, look at this tree. This configuration. This is alive. You can see your style coming through here. It has depth. Understand what you did here and move outward.

Student: This is so hard.

Teacher: Did you think this was about making pretty pictures?
True art is hard work.

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This paper seeks to explicate this Studio dialogue and suggest how it might apply to the *Bet Midrash*. I propose that the bridge concept that allows us to speak about them both in a single conceptual space is the idea of authenticity. It will be the work of

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this paper to present an understanding of authenticity such that it is applicable both to the developing artist and maturing Jew. Authenticity as a concept is valuable as it allows us to incorporate the new individualism of the modern age without abandoning a transcendent sense of truth which pervades a traditional

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religious mindset. Thus it holds particular educational value today where we seek to connect our modern, individualist students to a world of text and tradition beyond themselves. I will argue that an arts education is particularly suited to cultivate this disposition, and will thereby show one aspect of how a well conceived arts program can contribute to the religious development of our students.

The word Authentic carries a particular sense of being true, unfeigned. The object – an authentic Lincoln-era antique, for example – is authentic just by being itself. The truth of a witness report, by contrast, needs to be verified – to correspond to the events it reports. But the word also carries a sense of it having been a part of a cultural tradition or stretching into the past. An authentic Chinese meal would contain ingredients really used in China, or a recipe and manner of preparation executed by the Chinese for a long time. It also carries a sense of uniqueness. A signature can be authenticated because on close analysis it is unique and cannot be copied or faked. There is only one signature per person – despite the different forms it takes each time it leaves the pen. Still, something unique remains constant in each instance of a person's signature and this alone allows it to be a sign of authenticity.

Taylor's quest for authenticity

These varied and inter-related meanings, which exist sometimes in tension, form the ground for Charles Taylor's profound book, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991). Taylor argues that the search for authenticity allows the ground of discovery to remain

the innerscape of the human personality but it avoids the pitfall of allowing such a search to collapse into a self indulgent and relativistic worldview. Reclaiming a proper understanding of authenticity would maintain the true gains of modernity with its elevated and emancipated status of the individual. However, by returning

this necessarily individualistic theory to its proper philosophic moorings, it resists a narrowing and trivialization of meaning which Taylor identifies as a significant modern malaise.

We side with Taylor in acknowledging individualism as an important success for modernity. We do not wish to relinquish the hard-earned freedoms that have undoubtedly improved the position of a religious Jew in society. And yet this individualism has come at a price:

The dark side of individualism is a centering [sic] on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society. (Taylor, 1991, p. 4)

Taylor locates the ideal of authenticity as emerging at the end of the eighteenth century chiefly with the writings of

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Rousseau. Not that Rousseau had introduced this concept himself, rather, he was able to capture and describe the pervasive culture shift occurring in his time. "It is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths" (Taylor, 1991, p. 27). Taylor explains that the ability to contact a sort of inner voice antedates the Romantic Age and finds in the writings of St. Augustine an early expression of such a concept. However,

with the advent of the Romantics, "being in touch [with an inner sense of self] takes on independent and crucial moral significance." It is no longer a route to discover moral truths. Instead, the development of this inner self holds intrinsic value, "something we have to attain to be true and full human beings" (Taylor, 1991, p. 29).

Taylor posits that a fully developed sense of authenticity will resist the self-centered modern malaise in two ways. For the first way, he argues that one can never discover anything, let alone one's unique nature in completely isolated self reflection. Rather, meaning is derived through language and dialogue. This perforce brings us into contact with others and tradition, the source and transmitter of language. For the second way, he argues that the individual uniqueness and autonomous choices encouraged by a search for authenticity must carry significance. Defining significance puts us back in contact with meanings and demands outside ourselves:

I want to show that modes [of contemporary culture] that opt for self-fulfillment without regard a) to the demands of our ties with others or b) to demands of any kind emanating from something more or other than human desires or aspirations are self-defeating, that they destroy the conditions for realizing authenticity itself. (Taylor, 1991, p. 35)

Returning to the theme of dialogue, Taylor states:

The general feature of human life that I want to evoke is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. (Taylor, 1991, P. 33) [Italics in the original]

The dialogical nature of a traditional Jewish education is manifest. Our

tradition is Oral. Our sages argue with one another constantly and over centuries. The Talmud presents all its wisdom through intricate dialogues which in turn are deciphered through the traditional study partner exchange called a *hevruta* (friend). A contemporary Torah class is filled with live exchange between Rebbe and Talmid.

... the search for the authentic does not allow the trivial artist to do whatever she feels like in an indulgent or flippant display of emotion.

Taylor argues that the same is true for art. "In the case of the solitary artist, the work itself is addressed to a future audience... The very form of a work of art shows its character as *addressed*" (Taylor, 1991, p. 35). [Italics in the original]

Similarly, Taylor points out that the modern emphasis on autonomy, on the self-directed choice must also presuppose a concept of significance. Significance is not something an individual can decide rather it is conferred by a society:

It may be important that my life be chosen, as John Stuart Mill asserts in *On Liberty*, but unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence. (Taylor, 1991, p. 39)

In summary, "Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands" (Taylor, 1991, p. 40).

A Hasidic perspective

The theme of authenticity pervades the work of many Hasidic thinkers. Rav Kook addresses it throughout his writings; see in particular his collections of essays entitled "Self and the Inner War" in *Orot Hakodesh* (Kook, 1985, vol. 3 p. 115 – 144) Intriguingly, Rav Kook is also among the few religious thinkers to address the virtues of visual arts directly. However, I would like to focus in particular on the thought of the three generations of Hasidic Masters who together make up the world of Przysucha. Rabbi Michael Rosen's book detailing their thought is aptly titled *The Quest for Authenticity* (2008). This

title captures the essential ideas of the Yehudi, Rav Simha Bunim and the Kotzker Rebbe. While their philosophy is a rich and complex fabric, it echoes many of the major themes highlighted by Taylor in his treatment of Authenticity. "In my opinion, there is one seminal value from which all these characteristics flow, whether

consciously or not; namely, the supreme value of personal authenticity" (Rosen, 2008, p. 136).

In clarifying the concept of personal authenticity, Rosen states:

Not the solipsism of the romantics, in which there is no reality outside oneself. Rather, we mean a sense of individuation, which is indeed to be found within one's personal soul... This sense of the Divine in oneself creates a demand on the human being to respond to G-d, but with his individuality. (Rosen, 2008, p. 136 n. 2)

Here we have returned to the themes of individuality and outside demand.

Przysucha is deeply individualistic and yet tied to tradition. This complicated dance, difficult to untangle, can be used to decipher some of the more convoluted statements issuing from the school of Przysucha. With regard to the Mishnah in Avot (2:1) which states "Rebbe said: What is the straight path that a person should choose? Whatever is honorable to the doer," R. Bunim taught:

That is to say, that the soul of each individual has its own style in the service of God, in the performance of Torah and commandments, which he should not change . . . Therefore he should not take a path that is not special or unique to him; even though he greatly admires the way of service of a certain righteous person and that way appeals to him more than his own-nevertheless he should not move; a righteous person must hold fast to his path. And that is the proof that his path is true.

(*Ramatayim Zofim*, Chap. 10:17; *Kol Simhah*, *Masei*, 103)

The Yehudi founded the school of Przysucha. He clearly taught a path and ideal very different from his Rebbe, the Seer of Lublin. And yet, the Yehudi would insist that he never left his Rebbe.

Przysucha looked inward and tried to explicate the unconscious motivations behind religious observance, cleansing it of the dross of ulterior motives – *negiot*, in the new language of Przysucha. While it concentrated on the inner workings of the soul, it studiously avoided a mystification of the human personality by overlaying layers of Kabbalistic language which would dilute its committed human focus.

The religious artist's mandate

This concept of authenticity which we have traced through the secular writings of Charles Taylor and the Hasidic school of Przysucha well describes the artist's mandate. An artist's criteria for success cannot be found in externals. It is not an engineering feat that needs to work efficiently, nor a business venture that needs to be profitable, nor an educational endeavor that generates learning. A fine artist is the opposite of a commercial artist or graphic designer whose goal it is to please the client. Rather, for the fine artist, success is found when the art reflects some inner sense of beauty, or articulates an inner vision. And yet the search for the authentic does not allow the trivial artist to do whatever she feels like in an indulgent or flippant display of emotion. The hard work of producing art derives from accessing an inner vision while struggling with the constraints and demands of an aesthetic truth which emanates from somewhere outside the self. The dialogical element is present in that authentic art does not copy the great works of others and yet communicates with them in a shared artistic language. Art gains significance when it can reference other significant works and comment on them. In a move not unlike the birth of Przysucha, the major innovators of new artistic styles, who broke with the conventions of the past, did not do so in isolation. Rather, the innovators gained significance because they took issue with

their predecessors and created dialogical tension with the schools from which they sprung.

When applied to the religious mandate, the quest for authenticity helps navigate the uneven terrain trod by the modern religious Jew. On one hand, authenticity as described encourages the search for a unique personal connection to God. It encourages the individual to ignore externals and concentrate on what is found within. It eschews rote and an unthinking reliance on tradition and therefore embraces a strong and developed sense of individualism. However, the concept of authenticity also contains elements which bridle at an overemphasis on individualism. To be authentic is also

to be true. This truth to which one must adhere is not whatever one decides for oneself. Rather, this truth transcends the individual and binds the person to something larger and more demanding than one's self-defined individuality.

Educational application

How can an educator hope to transmit this abstract and nuanced concept of Authenticity to students? The art studio provides a natural laboratory for the development of just such a disposition. The ideal is promoted not through sophistry but by producing art. The artist is trained to capture the objective outer landscape and to learn to look inward. The artist wants to find his unique voice. The concept

of authenticity qualifies what we mean by unique. Taylor brings an absurd example. I am unique by virtue of the fact that I have exactly 3,732 hairs on my head.

To become authentic requires serious work.

(Taylor, 1991, p. 36). Such uniqueness is quite obviously meaningless. Authenticity requires uniqueness expressed in an area of meaning. Only when we possess a shared ground of value concepts, a shared horizon as Taylor describes it, can authenticity begin to be expressed.

The value of the concept of Authenticity should be explored in our schools as an

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Jewish Educational Leadership invites articles for the Winter 2012 issue focusing on

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Art and Authenticity

enduring understanding. This rich and subtle concept embraces both our student's deep modern sensibility that they must be valued as unique individuals with a unique contribution to make – and it holds them responsible to something larger and demanding beyond themselves. To become authentic requires serious work. It demands an understanding of tradition and the truth therein before one can begin to sort out the authentic from the inauthentic within. I believe that these rather abstract discussions have direct application in the art studio. The quest for authenticity comes alive in a very concrete way as young artists search to develop a style and voice of their own and yet are not allowed by this very search for authenticity to put just anything on the canvas. When this quest of authenticity is properly identified and described to students a transference to their religious and spiritual worlds can be affected.



Student: I can't pray. These words don't say anything to me. (Closes the *siddur*)

Teacher: What is it you would like to say to God?

Student: 'Thanks.' That's all. Why can't I just say 'thank you God' and be done?

Teacher: If that is what you want to say to God, if that is what your heart is moved to say – then say it.

Student: Good. So we are done.

Teacher: I am just surprised that is all you have to say. I look at your painting and I see a world of issues. Isn't that also occupying your heart?

Student: That's art and this is davening.

Teacher: And both are inward experiences. Both help us to listen more closely to who we truly are and what it is we have to say.

Student: So what's wrong with, "Thank you?"

Teacher: It could be a perfect prayer. Moshe prayed for Miriam in five words. But it could also be pat and trite and too easy. It depends on where it comes from.

Student: My prayers are my prayers, how can you judge?

Teacher: I am not judging – you are. Why did you spend 5 hours in the studio today perfecting your painting? Why wasn't it good enough like it was yesterday?

Student: It just wasn't – it didn't hold together, it wasn't done.

Teacher: But what told you whether a painting is done or not done, or coherent?

Student: I have a sense of it and work on it until it feels right.

Teacher: But not everything you put on paper, even when it comes from an expressive place, feels right.

Student: No, not everything. In fact, rarely are my first sketches done.

Teacher: If you want your prayers to be authentic, then you need to listen closely and develop a sense for when they are real and done.

Student: But what's the point of all these words that I didn't even write?

Teacher: Those are the masterpieces we go to for possibilities and inspirations. The works we sometimes even argue with. Every morning when you open your *siddur*, it's like taking a walk through the Met.

Student: Every morning the same thing.

Teacher: That's what a masterpiece is. It can be reexamined over and over and still give up new meanings.

Student: I couldn't walk through the Met every morning. I'd get overwhelmed and then used to it.

Teacher: You would give up a gift like that? Sure it would be work to be open to seeing it fresh every morning. But who said being a Jew was easy?

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