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Rethinking the Education of Cultural Minorities to and from Assimilation: A Perspective from Jewish Education

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Education and assimilation seem intimately connected; education either supports assimilation or thwarts it. But these paradigms assume a model of cultural vitality that depends on what one scholar aptly terms “tenacious adherence,” over time, to an unchanging cultural or religious tradition. Taking the example of the Jewish community and Jewish education and drawing on Jewish history and contemporary sociology of the Jews as well as other scholarship, this article presents the argument that this model is untenable. Instead, the goals of Jewish education ought to be reconceptualized, and the aim should instead be for “responsible assimilation,” that is, the cultivation of the capacity to creatively and responsibly assimilate external norms and practices in the service of the growth and vitality of Jewish culture.

INTRODUCTION

What is the relationship between education and cultural assimilation? Assimilation may be defined as “the decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic/racial distinction and cultural and social differences that express it” (Alba & Nee, 1997, p. 863), or somewhat more ambiguously, “[those] processes that result in greater homogeneity within a society” (Kazal, 2004, p. 3).\(^1\) From the perspective of a majority culture, education may be perceived as a beneficial instrument of minority cultural assimilation into the majority—beneficial because it will be helpful economically or culturally for the minority to become assimilated. The minority group in question may or may not agree.

A paradigm case is the education of immigrants within the public school system of the new host country; under the best of circumstances, that education provides a gateway to cultural and material success in the new land. On the other hand, another paradigm is the education of native peoples who find themselves a minority among a colonial majority, within the system of schooling established by the colonizing power. These examples immediately bring into focus the tension between the majority’s positive but perhaps paternalistic perspective on assimilation and

\(^1\)Nagel (1994), Kazal (1995), and Alba & Nee (1997) all describe the decline of a prior, 1960s-era conception of assimilation in the American context, in which immigrants conform to a pre-existing, static, normative Americanness.

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the minority’s hesitant or even beleaguered perspective. Thus, Nomi Stolzenburg believes that assimilation is “the major threat to a pluralistic society . . . more insidious than outright exclusion and hence possibly more dangerous” (Stolzenberg, 1993, p. 666).

Notice, here, that the education under discussion is, specifically, an education that encourages the minority to assimilate culturally into the majority. But there is another perspective entirely, that focuses on the ways in which education thwarts cultural assimilation, in order to preserve the ethnic or cultural integrity of the minority community. Indeed, the entire field of multicultural education is premised on the notion that public education has a moral responsibility to accommodate or preserve minority cultural differences, and that it has the capacity to do so. So too are the various sub-fields of particularist, sometimes termed “parochial,” faith- or community-based education, such as Islamic education (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004), or Greek education (Tsolidis & Pollard, 2010), or Jewish education.

**TWO STANDARD METAPHORS**

Within Jewish educational discourse—the focus of this study—the operative assumption is that educating Jewish students “Jewishly” is counter-assimilatory. That is: the promotion of Jewish values, the training of students in Jewish ritual practices, and the teaching of a curriculum of Jewish history and thought is intended to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of individual Jews—their “Jewish identities.” Moreover, given demographic concerns about the future of the Jewish community in the context of high rates of exogamy, policy-makers and practitioners hope that those educational efforts will contribute to the preservation of the Jewish community as a whole.² Indeed, the assumption is such a commonplace one that it goes unnoticed, frequently appearing in one of two standard metaphors in Jewish scholarly and popular discourse, each of which sets (Jewish) education and assimilation against each other as polar opposites.

The first metaphor is biological: cultural assimilation is conceptualized as a disease, and education is the inoculation or antidote against that disease. “The only antidote to assimilation is Jewish education” (Nathan-Kazis & Zeveloff, 2011). Charmé calls this a “drink-your-milk” model of Jewish education, fortifying the bones with calcium to stave off osteoporosis (Charmé, Horowitz, Hyman, & Kress, 2008, p. 117). A second metaphor is architectural; cultural assimilation is an assault and education is a defensive bulwark against that assault. Thus, thirty years ago, Fox titled an essay, “Is Jewish Education a Bulwark Against Assimilation?” (Fox, 1981). Or consider a recent op-ed in the Jewish press: “serious Jewish education and Jewish practice . . . are the water pumps and sandbags employed . . . against the rising tides of assimilation” (Alperson, 2011).

I noted, above, that both of these metaphors set up an opposition between assimilation and education. But that is not quite accurate. It is more accurate to say that both of the metaphors set up an opposition between an external entity or influence and the thing that is being attacked, with education potentially standing in the way. Education is the antidote to the disease, or the prophylactic calcium injection. Education is the sandbag barrier holding back the water, or the defensive

²For the present purposes, I intend to focus on assimilation itself, not exogamy, and to maintain the distinction between those two terms in a way that public Jewish discourse fails to do. To put the point another way, an endorsement of healthy cultural assimilation should not be misinterpreted as complacency in the face of the demographic challenges facing the American Jewish community.
bulwark. Notice that, according to the first metaphor, if cultural assimilation is a disease, then we ought to be able to identify the organism that is supposedly threatened by the disease. According to the second metaphor, if cultural assimilation is an assault, then we ought to be able to identify the putative object of the assault—the target, the fortified position that is under attack from external forces.

What is under attack? There are two ways of conceptualizing the target of the attack: either assimilation is an attack on Judaism itself, on the preservation of its norms and practices, or else assimilation is an attack on something called “Jewish identity,” that is, the identity of particular individuals who consider themselves to be Jewish. However, in what follows, I will draw on the work of a variety of scholars—historians, sociologists, cultural theorists—to argue that neither of these approaches can withstand scrutiny. In fact, the very concept of cultural assimilation needs to be rethought. But the rethinking that I have in mind itself runs into a problem of normativity. If assimilation (or its inverse, fidelity to tradition) no longer functions as a clear criterion for thought and practice, including educational thought and practice, what can take its place?

A HISTORICAL REASSESSMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF ASSIMILATION

In 1966, the historian Gerson Cohen delivered a commencement address to the Hebrew Teachers College, provocatively titled “The Blessings of Assimilation in Jewish History” (Cohen, 1966/1997). He opens by citing a well-known interpretive teaching (a midrash), according to which the biblical Israelites deserved to be redeemed from Egyptian slavery due to their fidelity to tradition in three respects: they did not change (i.e., Egyptianize) their names, they did not change their language, and they did not change their distinctive style of dress. The message of the midrash, therefore, is an anti-assimilationist one: “Jewish survival and above all Jewish vitality in the past derived in large measure from a tenacious adherence on the part of our ancestors to all basic external traditional forms” (Cohen, 1966/1997, p. 146, italics added).

This idea, that tenacious adherence to traditional forms is a guarantor (or at least a predictor) of Jewish survival and vitality, is itself a central principle of cultural and religious conservatism. The idea is straightforward: in order to perpetuate a culture or a religion, it is necessary to preserve it to the maximum extent possible, to remain as close as possible to its original and unadulterated condition. Within the Jewish tradition, in addition to the midrashic description that Cohen cites, one might also point to rabbinic prescriptions. For example, consider an opinion in the Talmud regarding martyrdom: in most situations, one is required to accept martyrdom only to avoid the most heinous sins, but in certain situations—where there is a royal decree directed against Jews to modify a certain behavior—one must accept martyrdom “even to change one’s shoe strap.” The stance seems to be that, when Jewish continuity is at risk, one must make the ultimate sacrifice in order to maintain Jewish cultural practices, even practices that otherwise have little religious significance. In modern Jewish history, the foremost and most radical exponent of this kind of conservatism is Moses Sofer (1762–1839), a leading Hungarian rabbi, who famously rejected any and all proposed ritual changes by declaring that “all innovation is forbidden by the Torah.”

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3Cf. the original, slightly different version of the midrash in Leviticus Rabbah 32:5 and Song of Songs Rabbah 56:6.
4The opinion is attributed to Rabba, son of Rabbi Isaac in Tractate Sanhedrin 74a–b.
5See Responsa Hatam Sofer Part A, Responsum 28. Ironically, taking this phrase out of its original context was itself a startling interpretive innovation.
But Cohen (1966/1997) comes to bury Bar Kappara and other conservative, counter-assimilationist voices, not to praise them. He notes that there is ample evidence of Jewish adoption of “non-Jewish” names throughout Jewish history. Likewise, there is ample evidence that Jews have changed their language, and their dress, too. So as a descriptive claim about the past, the notion that tenacious adherence to traditional forms ensured the continuity and vitality of the Jewish people, is simply not true. And if the descriptive claim is not true, then the logic of the prescriptive claim—that what worked in the past will work in the future, if only the Jews are sufficiently tenacious in their adherence to traditional forms of Jewish practice—is undermined as well.

Nor does this point apply only to names, language, and dress; it applies to any aspect of Jewish tradition or culture. Indeed, the entire enterprise of modern historical scholarship on Judaism documents the point: what appears at first to be continuity over time becomes, on closer scrutiny, a history of evolution, diversity, adaptation, and innovation. Those innovations have come about, directly or indirectly, through the influence of external factors, sometimes when Judaism is forced to react to new challenges and sometimes when outside influences are integrated into Jewish thought and culture. “Assimilation and acculturation [have been] a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source of renewed vitality” (Cohen 1966/1997, p. 151). In fact, according to Cohen, “Jews survived as a vital group and as a pulsating culture because they changed their names, their language, their clothing, and their patterns of thought and expression [italics added]” (p. 152).

Almost thirty years after Cohen, another prominent historian, Amos Funkenstein (1995), critiqued the habit (among Jewish historians) to dichotomize between internal Jewish cultural dynamics and those influenced by external factors. The former tend to be characterized in terms of continuity and authenticity, the latter in terms of reactivity and assimilation. But these are false dichotomies, because every cultural phenomenon participates in and borrows from the broader cultural context: “assimilation and self-assertion are truly dialectical processes” (Funkenstein, 1995, p. 11). That is, the very act of asserting one’s own identity is always a process of dialogue with an external environment, indeed is not possible without a substantive engagement with that environment and an assimilation of its categories of meaning. In fact, then, rather than being opposed to one another, identity and assimilation actually go hand-in-hand.

What emerges from Cohen and Funkenstein, as well as the work of hundreds of their fellow scholars of the history of Judaism, is that the idea of assimilation as an attack on Judaism is hard to maintain. We should not imagine that there is an essential Judaism that persists over time, and that only heroic loyalty to that Judaism (“tenacious adherence”) in the face of external influences has maintained the continuity of the Jewish people. “The vanity of nationalism,” writes Eamonn Callon in another context, “has tended to promote illusions of cultural purity” (Callan, 2005, p. 471). But as David Myers puts it, “Assertions of a pure and pristine Judaism should be

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6Examples of scholars and the phenomena that they study—including the influences on those Jewish practices and those forms of Judaism that appear most “traditional”—are too numerous to mention. Interestingly, Baumgarten and Rustow (2011) argue that innovation in Jewish tradition has often been accompanied by a “culture-wide complicity in accepting innovations as traditional” (p. 210).

7Reisman (1997) proposes to distinguish assimilation, in which members of the minority “take on the values and customs of the majority culture” (p. 135), from acculturation, where they also seek to maintain their identification with the original culture. But the distinction is of limited usefulness and contradicts the usage proposed by Gordon (1964) in his classic work on assimilation, in which acculturation is one form of assimilation.
taken with a grain of salt” (Myers, 1997, p. 24). Thus, much of what we consider the highest expressions of Jewish culture, both form and content, are directly attributable to assimilation of ideas and practices from external influences. This is not an embarrassment; it is simply an historical reality.

ALLIED ARGUMENTS FROM SOCIOLOGY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Perhaps, when we think about assimilation, we should be looking not at Judaism but rather at the Jewish identity of individuals. Surely we can distinguish more culturally assimilated Jews from less culturally assimilated Jews? Surely we can discern an inverse correlation between cultural assimilation and continuity of identity—such that the most “assimilated” are the least likely to maintain their Jewish identities, and conversely, the most “Jewish” are the most likely to do so?

Here, too, our naïve conceptions do not withstand scrutiny. Of course it is true that individuals who see themselves as being “not very Jewish” have, we might say, weaker Jewish identities, and are less likely to observe Jewish practices and maintain Jewish affiliations, including choosing to marry another Jew and raise children as Jewish. But notice that the causal arrow goes from identity to assimilation (or exogamy), not the other way around. It is reasonable to hypothesize that a person with a weaker Jewish identity is, because of that weakness, more likely to spend more of her time engaged in secular pursuits outside of the Jewish community, more likely to interact with people outside of the Jewish community to a greater extent, and more likely to find a romantic partner outside of the Jewish community. What is missing is a theory that would explain the reverse causation (i.e., that would explain how cultural assimilation itself—the assimilation of non-Jewish cultural practices and norms—leads to an attenuation of Jewish identity).

When we turn to the contemporary sociological literature on Jewish identity, the picture becomes even muddier. Phillips and Kelner (2006), for example, point out that American Jews raised without a Jewish denominational affiliation (i.e., those Jews whom we might consider to be “more assimilated”) are not more likely to disaffiliate with the Jewish community than those who are raised in one of the three major Jewish denominations. Kaufman (2006) argues that most studies are designed to measure religiosity on a continuum of more or less—implicitly endorsing the norm of “tenacious adherence of traditional forms”—but these studies “cannot, for the most part, capture the many complex, sometimes contradictory, if not ambivalent, expressions of religious identity among American Jews today” (p. 170). And perhaps most influentially, Horowitz (1998, 1999, 2000, 2002) advocates for a reframing of Jewish sociology, away from the more normative question “How Jewish are the Jews?” and towards the more descriptive question “How are the Jews Jewish?”

What emerges for social scientific research on Jewish identity, then, is a rather destabilizing questioning of assumptions about authenticity and authority, sometimes called a “postmodern shift in identity studies” (Kaufman, 2006, p. 179). What we see around us, among contemporary Jews, is just what the historians of Judaism see, only more so: evolution, diversity, adaptation, innovation, and assimilation of external influences in the service of cultural vitality. We cannot

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8 More recently, Charmé and Zelkowicz have critiqued the “the utopian dream . . . to devise a precise and systematic yardstick of Jewishness against which Jews’ identities could be diagnosed” (Charmé & Zelkowicz, 2011, p. 165).
distinguish essence from ephemera, or tenacious adherence from assimilation, without imposing an unjustifiable normative standard. The best that we can do is to describe the variety in all its multifarious glory.9

The issues that I have been describing may resonate with the turn, within the field of cultural and post-colonial studies in the 1990s, to a focus on “hybridity” (Bhabha, 1994), which entails closer attention to “the constructive possibilities of cultural identities that are neither native nor foreign, but dwell in ‘in-between spaces,’ forever resisting the stasis of a fixed identity” (Myers, 1997, p. 26). Within this trend, scholars are particularly attuned to the ways in which diasporic conditions—living at a geographical or temporal distance from some real or imagined cultural wellspring—can be particularly generative as individuals seek to create, or are compelled to create, their own hybrid identities. For some, the notion of a fixed identity is not only historiographically suspect; it is also psychologically suspect. Kenneth Gergen claims that a “multifaceted, constantly-evolving identity [is] healthier than a unitary, stable identity in that the former can be more adaptive to changes in the environment that supports that identity” (Charmé et al., 2008, p. 128).10 In other words, the fixed identity that persists over time under varying conditions is not healthy and strong but rather rigid, brittle, and derivative, subsisting on an ever-diminishing resource. That is why, as Myers writes, hybridity “[resists] the stasis of fixed identity” (1997, p. 26).11

These issues also map onto a familiar tension within the field of Jewish sociology between what are sometimes called “traditionalists” versus “transformationists” (Liebman 1988; cf. Ritterband, 1995). Traditionalists maintain a more or less traditional model of Jewish life as the standard against which to measure contemporary Jewish behavior; transformationists argue that Jewish practice will change over time. Transformationists critique traditionalists for assuming that Jewish continuity is ensured only by a tenacious adherence to the traditional forms of Judaism. Traditionalists, for their part, critique transformationists for failing to distinguish meaningful and deeply rooted practices from superficial or ephemeral ones.12 To transformationists, traditionalists seem hopelessly nostalgic. To traditionalists, transformationists seem hopelessly naïve.

Given the choice between nostalgia and naïveté, Liebman (1988) himself sides with the traditionalists. “My argument with the transformationists,” he writes, “is that they deny an essential Judaism” (p. 68).13 Indulging in hyperbole, he accuses transformationists of believing that

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9 See Horowitz in Charmé et al (2008), and cf. Tsolidis and Pollard (2010): “Our theoretical lens seeks to privilege ‘bottom-up’ perspectives . . . We believe that students whose identification leads them to study Greek language and culture in Melbourne, with increasingly distant and sometimes fractured connections with Greece as a nation, can tell us about Greekness in unique ways” (p. 150).

10 The quote is a paraphrase by Jeff Kress, of Gergen (1972), located in Charmé et al. (2008). The contrast may be overdrawn: one can extol the virtues of an adaptive, evolving identity without opposing a healthy degree of stability and continuity.

11 Hybridity is often framed in terms of linguistic usage. Thus, while identity has sometimes been framed in terms of a linguistic choice between the minority language and the majority language (see, for example, Heilman, 1981, p. 236), a more nuanced perspective notices the fluidity and blending of language in the enactment of identity (see Benor, 2010).

12 Traditionalists may cite Gans’ (1979) concept of “symbolic ethnicity,” a kind of residual ethnicity that replaces the thick ethnicity of new immigrant groups (see, e.g., Ritterband, 1995, p. 390). But transformationists wonder why Gans privileges some ethnic practices over others (see, e.g., Kaufman, 2006, p. 172).

13 Cohen (2010) emphasizes that Liebman is an “instrumental essentialist” (i.e., that he is not committed to any particular conception of the essence of Judaism). Also see Cohen (2001).
“Jewish vitality . . . is independent of fidelity to the Jewish past or the Jewish tradition” (p. 69). He acknowledges, of course, that Judaism has changed and will continue to change, but writes that “there is a point where Judaism . . . might so transform itself that it can no longer be called Judaism” (p. 70). And most importantly for our purposes, he criticizes the transformationists descriptivism or non-normativism, that is, their apparent refusal to endorse certain cultural practices over others.\textsuperscript{14}

This is, indeed, an important critique. But on the other hand, when Liebman embraces the notion of “fidelity to the Jewish past” as his criterion, when he affirms an “essential Judaism,” when he makes an implicit slippery-slope argument about the scary future when Judaism is no longer Judaism, he is over-reaching, allowing his anxiety to overcome a mature historical sensibility.\textsuperscript{15}

What is missing, it seems, is a way to articulate a normative criterion without reinforcing a simple hierarchy in which the supposed tenacious adherence to traditional forms represents strong Jewish identity, while the creative appropriation of external influences represents a weak one. It must be possible to acknowledge that Jewish religion and culture is ever-evolving, that the assimilation of external influences can be a blessing, without abandoning the possibility of distinguishing between profound responses and shallow ones. Not all change is good. Conversely, it must be possible to conceptualize such a distinction—to articulate a normative criterion—without resorting to an ahistorical conception of an unchanging essential Judaism.

\textbf{IN PURSUIT OF A NORMATIVE CRITERION}

The discussion to this point has woven together literature from Jewish history and Jewish sociology—but it is important not to lose sight of the educational focus of this article. The question, for educators, is not merely whether they consider a particular cultural phenomenon to be a healthy innovation or a dangerous departure from tradition, but how they teach about such phenomena, and even more fundamentally, how they conceptualize the goals of the education of a cultural minority. The demand for a normative criterion is not a theoretical or academic one, but a very real one, because there are choices to be made.

In order to develop the point about a normative criterion, consider the argument put forward by Callan (2005). Callan notes that many people believe that the voluntary assimilation of a member of a minority group into a majority is wrong. Is there a philosophical defense of this belief?

Some people may think that voluntary assimilation reflects a lack of gratitude to the culture in which one was raised. However, regardless of the merits of such gratitude, it is surely a nuanced moral requirement that cannot simply boil down to obedience to others even at the cost of one’s own life projects. Others might suggest that there is an objective harm to the minority culture, but it is hard to pin down what this objective harm might be. Another possibility is that the assimilator

\textsuperscript{14}See also, more recently, Liebman (2001): “the challenge to traditional measures of Jewish identity [rests on] the notion that there is no system of beliefs or behaviors that is useful in defining higher or lower, stronger or weaker Jewish identity” (p. 106).

\textsuperscript{15}Liebman closes his essay by talking about his “fear . . . that the transformationist view unwittingly serves those who would transform American Judaism by severing it from both the Jewish tradition and the rest of world Jewry” (1988, p. 72). Also see Liebman (2001).
is a traitor to the original culture, especially in circumstances where the original culture feels threatened. Sometimes this is framed in terms of “complicity with oppression.” But in Callan’s view, this accusation is hard to maintain. If the assimilationist regime is coercive, then it is hardly the assimilator’s fault for submitting to the coercion. On the other hand, if the assimilationist regime is not coercive—if the external cultural milieu is welcoming and supportive—then it is more likely that the impetus to assimilate emerges from other, more noble, less traitorous motives. “Reasons to assimilate,” Callan writes, “are widely available that have nothing to do with seeking to profit from the oppression of others or being complacent about their fate” (2005, p. 493). So it is hard to see why one would assume a treasonous motive.

To clarify this argument, we have already noted the seriousness of the concern around Jewish out-marriage in contemporary Jewish public discourse. But it is hard to justify an accusation of treason against a contemporary American Jew for marrying a non-Jew, when that action is (presumably) not intended to undermine Jewish continuity. So the accusation of treason seems to lack ethical content. In the cultural sphere, it would be hard to justify an accusation of treason against a contemporary American Jew for adopting and employing “non-Jewish” behaviors, literary genres, scholarly trends, artistic modes of expression, or even religious practices. It may or may not be a good idea for Jews to rap or meditate, to become feminists or environmentalists, to adopt the Protestant concern for sola scriptura or the evangelical stance of biblical literalism—but it is hard to see how any of these assimilatory cultural moves are treasonous.

So we return to the question: what’s wrong with assimilation? Perhaps assimilation represents a kind of harm to the self, because of the assumed wound to one’s self-esteem or self-respect. This possibility is more promising, but Callan comes to the conclusion that it too is not defensible. Consider any actual situation where a minority suffers under an assimilationist regime, in which the cultural norms of the minority are denigrated. Under those circumstances, a person’s move towards assimilation would seem to represent not a diminishing of self-respect but rather a strengthening of it. After all, if a black man in America starts to act more white (whatever that means) because he is alert to the way that the majority culture denigrates black culture, it would seem that he has internalized that critique, and thus his change in behavior would result in increased self-respect, not a loss of self-respect.

But let us consider the possibility of assimilation as harm to oneself more carefully. When Callan rejects this possibility, what he seems to be missing is the possibility that others might evaluate and critique assimilation, not merely through the lens of chauvinism but on the basis of some criteria that, while not unambiguous, are nevertheless coherent. Once we strip away the idea that assimilating tendencies are always negative or destructive, as well as the idea that those who assimilate are committing acts of betrayal, it may still be appropriate to say, about a particular person that one knows well, for example, “That person is not acting in accord with his identity,” or, “For that person, the action in question represents a loss of self-respect.” Reframing the issue in terms of cultural assimilation rather than individual assimilation, it may still be appropriate to say, “This cultural project does not represent a healthy development for this minority community, despite the claims of its adherents,” or “This trend does not emerge from a responsible engagement with the cultural traditions of the community.”

In other words, educators—indeed anyone—may well want to impose a criterion to distinguish good or acceptable assimilation from bad, the right kind from the wrong kind. They do so in light of everything else they know and believe, not only about the particular person and the particular situation but about the history of the particular minority culture and practice and their
best understanding of its future. Callan wants to defend the right of an individual not only to leave a particular community, but to be free from reproach when she does so. But there is no avoiding the fact that educators do make judgments about the choices that others make—for themselves or for the community. This is not a license for moralizing judgmentalism; surely the sphere of interpersonal communication ought to be governed by a great deal of humility about our judgments and respect for the diverse perspectives of others. But educators do have reasons for their judgments, reasons that have to do with their beliefs about identity and culture and history, and indeed their beliefs about human flourishing.

NORMATIVE NOTES IN COHEN

To flesh out the unavoidable normativity of our judgments about assimilation, it will be helpful to turn back to Cohen’s address from 1966. Cohen tells his audience of educators that they “have been given the foundations for the acquisition of an authentic sense of what is healthy assimilation and what is unhealthy assimilation” (Cohen, 1966/1997, p. 156). He describes “the healthy appropriation of new forms and ideas for the sake of growth and enrichment” (p. 155), and of assimilation that is “capable of paralyzing or of energizing” (p. 155). All of these metaphors of the body should be contrasted with the imagery described at the outset of this article, that of assimilation as a disease and of education as an inoculation against that disease. Judaism may well be compared to an organism, but like a real organism, it exists in an environment and is sustained by and through the elements of that environment. It is true that there are also pathogens in the environment, but they are not pathogenic in and of themselves; they are, rather, harmful to the health of this particular organism at this particular time under these particular conditions. Or not.

Note, too, alongside Cohen’s use of health and growth, his allusion to a criterion of authenticity (“an authentic sense of what is healthy”). This is echoed by his reference to Sa’adia Gaon, the innovative tenth-century Babylonian theologian, as a “responsible teacher” (1966/1997, p. 153).

What is this notion of authenticity or responsibility? We know what it is not. It is not, and cannot be, a pre-determined form of Jewish belief or practice. It is not, and cannot be, an ahistorical conviction about the essence of Judaism. Cohen uses the adjective “authentic” not to describe the cultural phenomenon itself, but to describe the “sense” of the educators, the capacity of the educators to distinguish. It is not a particular cultural innovation that is blessed with the adjective “responsible” but rather the teacher, Sa’adia Gaon himself, who exercises or displays responsibility.\footnote{Cf. Baumgarten and Rustow, 2011, p. 226.} Authenticity and responsibility are not qualities or characteristics of particular practices or beliefs (depending on their degree of conformity to some prior form). They are, instead, qualities of the individual educator.

RETHINKING EDUCATION AND ASSIMILATION: THREE THESIS

Our pursuit of a normative criterion suggests a set of linked conclusions, which I will frame as three theses. The first thesis is this: the criterion that distinguishes between the good kind of
assimilation and the bad kind is health or growth, a criterion that is both organic and future-oriented. Mordecai Kaplan, the foremost twentieth century advocate for a reconceptualization of Jewish life and practice, frames the criterion as one that distinguishes between health and sterility: “there must obviously be some criterion for the difference between healthful assimilation of non-Indigenous forms and the passionless and sterile imitation of such forms” (Kaplan, 1934, p. 185).\(^\text{17}\)

The question therefore is not whether the value or practice under consideration represents tenacious adherence to a pre-existing tradition, nor whether it expresses some unchanging essence of Judaism. (To avoid any misunderstanding, the question is also not whether the value or practice under consideration makes me feel good or satisfies my short-term needs or desires.) Instead, the question is whether the value or practice leads to a flourishing individual or communal future, whether it opens up more dynamic and creative cultural or spiritual possibilities than it forecloses.

The second thesis is that educators must inevitably function not as transmitters of tradition, but as interpreters of the tradition for their particular cultural moments, or more generally, as cultural critics. Like the transformationists, they must be alert to the ways in which external influences will lead to cultural creativity and innovation, but like the traditionalists, they must embrace a critical distinction between some forms of assimilation and others. As noted, the criterion is health or growth—they must do their best to assess cultural innovation not in terms of fidelity to the past but in terms of the possibilities that it opens up for the future—but they must employ that criterion carefully, cautiously, responsibly. To whom is the educator responsible? She is responsible not only to the communal present and future but to the past as well.

Franz Rosenzweig may serve as our guide here, in his model of the movement from path to pathlessness. One who studies the Jewish tradition, he writes, ought to do so with the intention of moving past the path to “pathlessness” (Rosenzweig, 1923/1955, p. 80). But if that’s the case, then why bother going through the path in the first place? The answer: “only this laborious and aimless detour through knowable Judaism gives us the certainty that the ultimate leap ... leads to Jewish teachings” (p. 81). In other words, the leap into pathlessness is not dictated by the preceding path, but the person who takes that leap has the confidence that comes from having immersed oneself in Jewish history and tradition.\(^\text{18}\) The historian David Berger writes, in a lament for the poor educational and cultural condition of contemporary Jewish society, that “the sort of identity that we mean when we speak of Jewishness is molded in large measure by the [serious engagement with] the traditions and texts of an ancient and challenging culture” (Berger, 2006, p. 11). Educators must model not tenacious adherence to unchanging traditional forms, but serious and responsible engagement.

Third, and most fundamentally: the goal of Jewish education is not to prevent assimilation, to provide an antidote against a disease, or to build up a bulwark against an attack, to promote the tenacious adherence to the traditional forms of Judaism. Instead, the goal of Jewish education is the cultivation among students themselves of the nuanced and sophisticated capacity to assimilate external influences, but to do so with seriousness and responsibility. The work of assimilation is not only carried out by theologians, artists, and scholars; it must be the work of

\(^\text{17}\)Kaplan borrows the concern for imitative culture from Ahad Ha’am. See Kaplan (1937), chapter 10.

\(^\text{18}\)Cf. the discussion in Eisen, 1997, p. 28–29.
the students themselves. Likewise, the work of cultural criticism is not only carried out by educators; it must be the work of students themselves. In this sense, Jewish education must become education towards responsible assimilation.

CONCLUSION

This article has been an attempt to think through the relationship of education and assimilation, through the particular lens of one religio-ethnic community with its own history and internal dynamics. The immersion in the history, sociology, and public policy discourse of that community is intended to illuminate the larger phenomenon—not because every community or ethnic group is a valid model for every other, but at the very least because the conceptual issues that we have surfaced seem relevant more generally, even if they play out in particular, community-specific ways. Rather than imagining that education stands in opposition to cultural assimilation—rather than accepting either of the two basic metaphors, of assimilation as a disease or assimilation as an attack—the argument has been that those who are committed to the future of a particular minority community ought instead to articulate a position of “responsible assimilation,” and to advocate for education towards that goal.

For Jewish education, responsible assimilation entails asking not, “How can the static curriculum of Judaism be transmitted into the heads of these students?” nor, “How can these students be convinced to adhere tenaciously to the traditional norms and practices of Judaism?” Instead, those who are committed to the future of the Jewish community and concerned for the Jewish identity of their students ought to ask, “How should our educational interventions be constructed in order to promote a responsible, responsive, and vibrant Jewish future?” and “What should our pedagogy look like in order to cultivate the capacities among students to create that future for themselves?”

Jewish educators cannot afford to uphold a vision of an educated Jew that conforms to what (they imagine that) an educated Jew once knew. They cannot afford to choose to teach particular classical texts because (they imagine that) those texts have always been in the curriculum, and to teach them in the ways that (they imagine that) they have always been taught. This does not mean, of course, that educators ought to reject all that is old in favor of the latest fad. Instead, it means that, when making choices about curricula and pedagogy, the relevant criterion must always be their best assessment of the impact on a flourishing Jewish future. 19

Now, within the community of Jewish educators, some critics may respond to this proposal with incredulity. It is all well and good, these critics will say, to engage in ivory-tower speculations about anti-essentialism and the post-modern construction of personal identity. But Jewish educators are faced with a dramatically asymmetrical situation, in which students know next to

19Some may assume that my arguments will be more acceptable to liberal Jewish educators, for whom fidelity to tradition is in any case balanced against the need for appropriate accommodations to modern culture, and may find less acceptance among more conservative Jewish educators, who are more committed to traditional forms of Jewish practice and belief. But there is abundant evidence that liberal Jewish educators may still be in the grip of an image of Jewish education as inoculation, or as building up bulwarks; they may simply think of themselves as employing a weaker vaccine or building a lower bulwark. And so, my point here is that even liberal Jewish educators may need to rethink their assumptions about the relationship between education and assimilation and to orient their curricular and pedagogic decision-making away from a model of fidelity and towards a model of responsible assimilation.
nothing about Judaism while being fully immersed in Western culture. Under these conditions, endorsing assimilation seems to be a perverse case of making a virtue out of a vicious reality. And to be clear, the survivalist anxiety of the critics deserves to be recognized. As Cohen (2010) has argued, the Jewish community cannot be complacent about the question of how many people will consider themselves to be Jews in the future, given current patterns of association. But as a critique of the argument of this article, there is less here than meets the eye.

There may still be examples of those who reject their Jewish identities, or who acknowledge only biological connections to other Jews present or past. But however much this kind of assimilation was a reality in the past, in the contemporary West, this phenomenon is actually quite rare. Identity is no longer a zero-sum game. No one demands that one abandon one’s status and self-identification as a Jew in order to become a (non-Jewish, or non-ethnic) American.\textsuperscript{20} Instead, there are many whose Jewish identities are thin to the point of insignificance, who passively disassociate from the minority community simply because Jewish affiliation, and Jewish practice or belief, are rather far down their list of priorities. But again, identity is not a zero-sum game, and there is little reason to believe that their passions for chess or yoga or football or Thai food or reggae music or environmental activism are in any substantive sense the causes of the diminishment of their Jewish commitments.

Instead, any example of actual assimilation to which we might point seems, in fact, to be a case of assimilating outside influences into one’s own sense of Judaism and of Jewish identity. Some of these may be generative and some stultifying; some profound and some insipid; some elevating and some corrosive. Can one integrate one’s commitments as a Jew and a vegan? At one point not so very long ago, this was surely laughable, but today, there is a burgeoning interest in Jewish food ethics. Can one integrate Judaism and Buddhism? Some may be appalled, but the phenomenon is quite familiar. Can one read the traditional texts of Judaism critically? Once, critical study of the Bible was a bastion of genteel Protestant anti-Semitism, but today, our universities are full of creative and insightful scholarship, carried out by proudly identifying Jews who are as alert to residual anti-Semitism in their field as they are to residual pietistic traditionalism. Can one merge the latest trends in contemporary music or other art forms with Jewish themes and concerns? In the age of Matisyahu and the Idan Raichel Project, of course one can. Can one integrate the insights of neo-Kantianism or Hegelianism into Jewish theology? The two foremost traditionalist Jewish theologians of the twentieth century, Joseph Soloveitchik and Abraham Isaac Kook, clearly thought that one could and should. Can one internalize feminism’s fundamental ethical critique of patriarchal systems? The work is ongoing in every branch of Judaism but the most staunchly reactionary. Can one remain a Jew while rejecting in principle the heteronomy of religious ritual (i.e., can one have Jewish identity without Jewish practice)? Martin Buber thought that one could, and should, precisely because of his understanding of the demands of Jewish theology.

Are all these examples positive? Perhaps they are and perhaps they are not. But the point is that the proper criterion is not a question of whether they are “assimilationist,” which they all are. Nor can we ask whether they are authentically Jewish, which—if we mean, originally or essentially Jewish—none are. Instead, judgments about their value must be based on their generative potential, whether they lead to human flourishing, whether they contribute to a vibrant Jewish communal future.

\textsuperscript{20}This point is central to Horowitz’ argument in a recent (unpublished) manuscript. Also cf. Waters (1990).
Thus, the educational challenge is never really whether students adopt or integrate norms or practices from sources external to the minority culture into their minority-cultural identities, but how they do so and how it affects them. The primary educational concern for minority educators ought to be the student who does not see the contribution that she or he can make to the ongoing development of that minority culture, or who lacks the capacity to do so. To avoid this, it is precisely minority education towards responsible assimilation that ought to be the focus. In the case of the Jewish community, what will maintain Jewish identities in the future is not keeping outside influences at bay, building up bulwarks or inoculating students through Jewish education. Instead, what will maintain Jewish identities is the cultivation of the capacities for individual Jews and entire communities to assimilate the best and most creative cultural and intellectual influences in ways that are responsive to the Jewish past as well as the Jewish future.

This article opened by calling attention to an apparently obvious and straightforward distinction between the education of members of a minority group in the culture of the majority, which supposedly functions as a catalyst of assimilation, and their education in the culture of the minority (i.e., their own culture), which supposedly functions as an inhibitor of assimilation. But the argument of the article is that this apparently obvious distinction is not quite so simple. It is surely the case that the education of a member of the minority in the culture of the majority may result in the diminished cultural identity of that student, perhaps even to the point where that student no longer identifies with the minority group. In situations of porous cultural boundaries, when minority students can “pass,” there may be those who opt out. But that encounter with the majority culture may also contain the seeds of innovation and vitality for the minority culture.

Conversely, the model of an education in the minority culture is inevitably bound up with the question of fluidity and dynamism of that culture. The implicit assumption of a static minority culture ignores the history of evolution that every culture undergoes. And assuming further than the purpose of education is to promote tenacious adherence to that mythical static culture requires a willful ignorance of the way that cultural interactions have produced creative and vital responses, and the way that that process is occurring before our very eyes. Instead, I have argued that those educators who are committed to the flourishing of the minority culture must also be committed to an education towards responsible assimilation.

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