

Studying Pluralism in Jewish Education:

A project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University

<www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/pluralism.html>

The Language of Pluralism in a Jewish Day School

Rahel Wasserfall, Ph.D. and Susan L. Shevitz, Ed.D.

Abstract:

In this paper, we present some of our findings on pluralism in a Jewish day school and analyze what we call “cognitive pluralism” as it applies to discussions and decisions about Jewish ritual behaviors and policy in that setting. Examples presented in this paper reveal that tension exists within the school community with regard to the nature of the internal boundaries and the educational goals held by different segments of the teaching staff. The focus of this paper is on the language that the school’s teachers and administrators use to talk about pluralism and what this conveys in terms of the school’s educational approach. This paper is part of a larger project that investigates how a pluralist day high school socializes students to understand and accept its view of pluralism.

Working Paper v. 2, June 2009

This document is a draft version. Please do not cite without permission.

© 2009 Wasserfall and Shevitz

Background and Research Question

Pluralism is one response to the growing diversity within the contemporary Jewish community. In the recent past, many Jewish educational institutions have turned to pluralism in the hope that it will help to prepare young people to affirm and develop their own Jewish identities while learning not only to respect different approaches to Judaism but also to engage productively with people unlike themselves. This is a formidable challenge in schools, camps and other Jewish educational institutions where identity development is central to the mission. There are two fundamental questions: what exactly do schools mean by pluralism, and how do they enact their understanding of this concept?¹

The wider project, of which this paper is one part, investigates these two questions in the context of a pluralist Jewish day high school that we call Tichon. We explore how the school's pluralist values are communicated and taught to its incoming 9th graders. Tichon was established in 1997 with 48 students and as of this writing has an enrollment of about 290. The school accepts students from diverse segments of the Jewish community and sees this diversity as strength. Tichon, as stated on its web-site,

"... forms a diverse and pluralistic community. Our diversity is strength. An atmosphere of mutual respect provides a welcome forum for grappling with fundamental religious questions and strengthening individual Jewish identities. Our school nurtures a Jewish community characterized by a shared tradition, a common dedication to social justice, and a love for learning."

In order to understand how students come to understand pluralism as a strength within the school, two researchers observed all facets of the 9th grade experience during the 2005–06 school year, including formal classes and informal activities. More than thirty in-depth individual and group interviews with teachers, administrators and others regarding the school's efforts at pluralism, as well as individual interviews and focus groups with students, were conducted. Relevant curricula, student work, committee meeting minutes, web-based information, and other documents were studied. Observing what happens during that important first year at the school illuminates what pluralism means and how it is conveyed in that setting.²

Focus of This Paper and Significance of Its Findings

This research explores the various meanings of pluralism as conveyed by the school's teachers and the administrators. How do they talk, reflect and express this core value of their school?³ Faculty need to "buy in," to incorporate their understandings of this value into their world views, even if they challenge either the value itself or how it is enacted within the school setting. This paper analyzes the language used by teachers and administrators when speaking about pluralism. That language reveals not only the underlying principles that the school uses to enact its idea of pluralism but also the underlying tensions that exist in its vision of pluralism.

¹ For a few ethnographic studies on pluralistic day schools, see, Daniel Pekarsky, *Vision at Work: The Theory and Practice of Beit Rabban* (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2005); Bryan Conyer, PhD dissertation on an Australian Jewish day School, 2006; and Alex Pomson and Randal F. Schnoor, 2005 NRJE presentation, "Schools are Not Only for Children: The Impact of Day School on the Jewish Identities of Parents."

² We taped a few focus groups and classes and transcribed these verbatim. Text in italics as well as material in quotation throughout the paper are informants' words.

³ We draw from Edgar Schein's (1985) conceptualization of organizational culture as developed in his classic, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

Our working assumption is that observed action can only be fully interpreted when the language used in the setting is understood and analyzed by the researcher. This is not to imply a full or immediate correspondence between language and action, just as there is not total agreement between culture (what people say they do) and social structure (what people actually do), so there is never a full correspondence between language and action. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the actors' own assessments of their actions in order to understand their situation.⁴ This paper remains on the level of language and culture; we will interpret the meanings conveyed by the school's teachers and administrators in their descriptions.⁵ This paper remains, too, in the symbolic-cultural realm--the role of people's subjective meanings in social life (Geertz 1973)--and will point to tensions that exist for people in this setting when they reflect on their belief systems.

It is important to note, here, that a belief system does not need to form a coherent whole. People can and do, at times, contradict themselves, which always results in tension. That tension, in turn, provides dilemmas when the time comes to act as action involves making decisions about acceptable boundaries. In this case, we are discussing the boundaries of pluralism. By understanding the language used in the school, we will see the principles Tichon uses as it enacts its idea of pluralism.

What Does Tichon Mean by "Pluralism"?⁶

People at Tichon talk about pluralism as being in the cognitive realm:

"Success in Pluralism is also the ability to consider multiple possibilities cognitively, have enough self-doubt and integrity, and be able to suspend judgment."
(Administrator)

"Pluralism is about being open minded, ... even in math, there can be one question and many ways of solving the problem."(Administrator)

Pluralism is described as the ability to hold meanings which are at times contradictory, to present arguments which are both pro and con, to change positions, to think about difference and accept it in the cognitive domain. Administrators, as well as teachers, have used this language consistently and it is also used in the school's self-study that was prepared for its accreditation: "*Cognitive pluralism is the ability to understand, hold and grapple with multiple, even contradictory, interpretations and perspectives.*" (p.47)

As a prelude, let us say that the school educates its students to define themselves within the framework of changing positions and accentuates argumentation skills which need to be performed in a context of respect for people's beliefs. The outcome of this method of argumentation, the administration contends, is the creation of new approaches to Jewish education through creative uses of Jewish sources and traditions. The school respects new

⁴ See works such as Berger and Luckman, *Social Construction of Reality* (Doubleday, 1966); Schutz, *Collected Papers II*, 1964; Wuthnow, *Cultural Analysis* (Routledge and Kegan), 1984; and Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York Basic Books, 1973).

⁵ The complicated relationship between what people think they are doing, their subjective rendering of meanings and what they actually are doing is not the topic of this paper.

⁶ For a discussion of pluralism in contemporary Jewish theology in America, see Mittleman, Alan, "Pluralism: Identity, Civility and the Common Good," *Modern Judaism* (2001):125-143.

insights and is willing to bend when necessary⁷. This is an important strategy in a school whose mission legitimates and must accommodate different visions of religiosity. This strategy implies that school community members agree that all members of the community have the right to think and interpret their religious lives differently, but it does not imply that all ritual actions will be accepted in the school. There are clear limits to what is acceptable even though these boundaries are, at times, subject to negotiation and space is carved out for the expression of different emerging positions. By encouraging discourse characterized by the skillful use of argumentation and reason, where most Jewish religious positions are legitimated, the school forges accommodations as an ongoing process of respecting others' positions.

The discourse on the existing plurality in the realm of cognition stands in a context of the dilemma regarding unity of action. For example, while administrators might accept as legitimate that people have different interpretations of the laws of *kashrut*--ranging from those requiring two sets of ovens to the definition of kosher as ecologically sensitive practices--they assert that the school needs to have one set of rules that govern the school community. They need to establish a policy that accommodates people who are strictly kosher as well as those who interpret the laws of *kashrut* differently or even reject them out of hand. Their strategy of privileging cognition and thus legitimating plurality in discourse helps to achieve the needed unity in practice.

By legitimating different interpretations, administrators and faculty temporarily elude the difficult question of *mitzvot*: how are Jews commanded to do the *mitzvot*? How should Jews practice? Because it focuses on recognizing and legitimating the many ways Jews understand their religious lives, pluralism is understood as being about meanings and not simply about practice. This is frequently seen in the classroom, as in a lesson about the leadership of the prophet, Moshe.

Students were asked to take turns presenting and interpreting the positions of the different actors in the unfolding drama. They were coached to discuss each actor's point-of-view from different perspectives while grounding themselves in the text. This discourse on meanings also relegates the difficulties that arise with action to the realm of behaviors and not of learning. In the *Tanakh* classes, as well as in the *Talmud* classes, teachers were very careful not to tell students what they needed to believe or to derive from the texts. They worked very carefully to carve out space in which students could express their different attitudes and find their own ways into the texts. One teacher speaks to her class:

"I don't know if it's correct or not, but I am in Tanakh class not to tell you what I think [about] what's right. I'd rather have you figure out what you think. And observing from the beginning of the year till now, just the way that you talk to each other and reference what each other said, I think of pluralism and Tanakh as being open to others' opinions and not putting them in categories. And you're not calling that pluralistic, but to me, that's in some way what pluralism means."

At the core of these teachers' educational pluralistic pedagogy is their commitment to making sure that students' different beliefs are heard and their positions acknowledged. This pedagogy requires that students take risks, as the following teacher tells her class:

⁷ See Shevitz and Wasserfall, "Building Community in a Pluralist Day School: The Balance Between Risk and Safety, Community and Individual in The Life of the School," unpublished working paper, 2006.

“...I want you to take risks in this class. Not taking a risk is really not learning. Taking a risk is a good thing. But we have to have a safe environment... you have to be able to talk together.”

The connection between carving out spaces (i.e. the teacher’s role of providing a safe place) and jumping into those spaces (i.e. the student’s role of taking a risk) makes possible accommodation to student needs by teachers. Teachers will go to great lengths to make sure that everyone’s religious understandings are taken into account. To the extent that teachers and students are willing to entertain all movements within Judaism as being legitimate and respond to them with understanding, they relegate their differences to another realm.

Legitimizing all denominations within Judaism

Many faculty members shy away from the language used by the American Jewish community to define its various denominations-- i.e. Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform—as this implies a hierarchy in religious practice. On the first day of the school year, the 9th grade dean showed the new students the assumption embedded in the language generally used in the American Jewish community: the order usually suggests a movement from the “more observant” (Orthodox) to the “less observant” (Reform).

“.. Why do we do this in this order? Actually Reform are closer to the Bible; they have seven days of Pesah...”

In his mind, this is not how a pluralistic school should respond to different visions of Judaism. Instead, each denomination should be looked at according to its own belief system and yardsticks.

This is the reason that the school identifies its different *minyanim* (prayer groups) with terms describing their seating arrangement and content rather than denomination. The “*mehitza*” “minyan, for example, features a divider between male and female sections -- a practice observed by the Orthodox community. In the “egalitarian” group, both male and female members have the same liturgical rights and responsibilities. “Liberal” refers to the way that group’s prayers are reinvented.

Some faculty members are unhappy with this nomenclature and want to return to the old language for the sake of clarity. They contend that this new language makes it difficult for students to identify properly with their groups. Some administrators contend, on the other hand, that ambiguity is useful. They feel that students should identify with something wider than denominations, emphasizing post-denominational Judaism even if post-denominationalism is not identified as one of the school’s principles.

As they explore new modes of identification, administrators do not seem to mind less clarity; they believe that new meanings unfold in the process. But clarity in cognition is different from clarity in action. Because clarity in action might, at times, be needed or even required, policies have to be implemented. But sharp cognitive distinctions became evident among different positions as the school struggled to define “pluralism.” This very important struggle might actually open a space, or a context that students are encouraged to explore. It seems that less clarity in language—this use of *mehitza*, *egalitarian* and *liberal*--opens up a space for people who might agree to disagree in action. Privileging meanings enables people to study together even though they practice differently.

Cognitive Pluralism and Curricular Choices

Talmud and Tanakh are at the heart of the school's Jewish curriculum, and--consistent with Tichon's focus on cognitive pluralism--its approach to these core subjects allows for multiple interpretations. Talmud and Tanakh are often presented as intrinsically pluralistic. One teacher says:

"Talmud is a pluralistic document because the ways of thinking about issues, the main idea being that each individual will have a position, [just as] each sage has a single position. Midrash has a multiplicity of positions; it is a chaotic document. Halacha has one opinion [in order to] to bring the Jewish community together."

Issues of practice are altogether a different issue for people who privilege Talmud and Tanakh and the ensuing multiplicity of meanings. The fact that all the sages were strictly bound by commandments (*mitzvot*) is not the point when teachers present the Talmud as a pluralistic document. What is important is that many voices are recorded, and students are urged to find their own.

Practice, on the other hand, closes the discourse; *halacha* is decided according to this commentator, not the other. When a speaker privileges meaning, it does not matter for the sake of the community what course of action is taken; what is important is reason and language—not, for the time being, action or ritual.

Ritual and Pluralism—Pluralism in the Realm of Action

Since people at the school are generally happy with cognitive pluralism and an attitude of openness to other viewpoints, problems related to pluralism emerge when space is carved out for different forms of personal expressions. The most contested personal expressions are those which matter most to adolescents or to the administration. Issues about inclusion in religious ritual and about gender fall into this category and are areas of contention and negotiation.⁸ During a ritual, people express not only values and norms (what is acceptable) but also state the boundaries (what is not included). Rituals and public events at the school, such as the different retreats, prayer services, commencement ceremony are expressions of acceptable boundaries.

People who privilege meanings must confront the question that arises when different meanings lead to different actions. They must determine what action is acceptable. An example from the egalitarian minyan illustrates this. One teacher explained that in the year prior to our visit to the school, this minyan had difficulties deciding what prayers should be included in its daily services. Most of its members did not want references to the Temple sacrifices included in their prayer service. This would eliminate segments in one particular prayer about “*ishei Israel*/the fire of Israel.” The issue for this minyan was the implication of hierarchy between the two systems of worships, between praying and actual sacrifices, that keeping these segments might suggest. Liturgy could be interpreted as less authentic than the sacrificial system and thus somewhat a lesser form of worship than the sacrificial system.

The question thus arose: was the past temple sacrifice service more authentic than today's *tefilah*/prayer service? One member of the group wanted very much to keep the reference to the sacrifices in the service. This is a clear indication of the power the individual has when it comes to the gestalt of the group, at least in the description of events by informants. The students spent hours debating the issue via email conference. Which of the two approaches was

⁸ In this, Tichon mirrors the wider Jewish community. Women's participation, gay rights and degrees of ritual observance are loci of differentiation at the school.

more appropriate in a pluralistic school--the *tefilah*/prayer or reference to the cult of sacrifice? The Israeli political climate at the time added more fuel to the debate. At that point, an Israeli fringe group was preparing to restart the sacrificial system as they waited for the messiah, the rebuilding of the temple and the destruction of the Dome of the Rock; thus, these texts carried political implications for a modern audience, as well.

At group meetings, the minyan came up with an accommodation that satisfied all. They focused on interpretation of the phrase: "lights Israel's fire." They determined that this passage could, of course, refer to sacrifice, but decided that it could also be taken in a more symbolic way, suggesting that "your fires can be lit by other means like, *tefilah* itself." They agreed to keep the traditional version of the written text with a reference to the temple cult but gave it new meaning in their translation. The students saw this as a seminal moment for the group, as a powerful example of pluralism-in-action.

In a school that privileges multiple meanings and reason, it is through this kind of conversation that all who want to be part of the Jewish school can work together to find a compromise that will work for all. Thus, a pluralistic school assumes responsibility for teaching all of its constituents how to have that kind of conversation. It means teaching a mode of discourse and skills that will allow the students to participate effectively in such conversation. This, again, demonstrates that meaning--not action--is the focus.

Tichon expects its students to know what they think and to be able to articulate their positions with others. Teachers and administration want students to be involved and think deeply, to be "serious" about what it means to be in such environment. They want students to be engaged in discussion about pluralism and see pluralism as a leavening agent that makes people reflect upon their beliefs and engagements and "revitalize" school life. They want students "to be passionate about their Judaism." They would like to educate students to engage with Torah, meaning that Torah matters to them.

Cognitive pluralism requires involvement of the participants; it requires engagement to be meaningful, and goes hand-in-hand with another phrase that is used at the school: engaged pluralism. This means that people are willing to question themselves and others relentlessly when it comes to basic, meaningful issues. By being "engaged" and "serious," another of the school's favorite words, people look at their assumptions and beliefs in critical ways.

Engaged Pluralism⁹

Cognitive pluralism fosters a culture of engagement with others. For an orthodox rabbi teaching at the school, "*Pluralism is a political stance, not a religious stance. Pluralism is in the process of engagement.*" He continues to explain his theology:

"Doing this brings about the presence of God into the world. This is my theology: God is one. There is no unity but a multiplicity behind which there is unity, I need to hear the multiplicity and understand all the pieces to get a clear picture of God in the world."

Engaged pluralism is the process of being seriously involved in the topic at hand. Teachers and administrators believe that "*all Jews are struggling Jews in the modern world.*" Teachers praise their

⁹ Michael Lerner has called for active engagement and serious pluralism. See his "Pluralism in Jewish Life," *Humanistic Judaism*, Autumn 90; XVII:21-5. Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 367 argues for a reflective pluralism.

classes when they are engaged, when the students are struggling and willing to raise questions and to take provocative stands. Members of the community enjoy this engagement, which, in itself, is a goal of teaching in the school. When students are provocative, they are able to "shake up" others, and in the process, teachers believe that learning is taking place.

Teachers also bring aspects of different cultures and world views into their classes so that the students will see their own thinking and practices in context, and be challenged to explain why they believe as they do. Teachers believe that a pluralistic environment can flourish only when people can explain their positions to themselves and others. As one teacher said, "...a place like [Tichon] gives you the alternatives to rethink your life, reinvent your life and your observances."

Tichon has built a structure within which students can learn to take a stand. Its "debate midrash" is a much-loved structure. People at the school are proud of it. The language itself is a play on the phrase *beit midrash*, which is a "house of learning" or study hall. The *Beit Midrash* at Tichon is an actual space where the "debate midrash", which could be translated as "learning by debate", takes place. The use of that term in and of itself is very telling since the administration, reflective about its practices, is aware of the implications. Teachers have complained that it was not used enough this past year and they plan to reintroduce it in the coming months.

The debate midrash's format is designed to foster solid argumentation, and, in the school's words, "no mushy" position is acceptable. Speakers must take stands. A neutral member of the audience may become active and move into the debate arena. Likewise, debaters can remove themselves from the platform and join the audience or change sides. Debaters face each other. Those who are "pro" stand on one side of a teacher, and those who are "con" stand on the faculty member's other side. People take turns speaking, using very respectful but strong language; and no "wishy-washy" positions are accepted. Over the course of the debate, a student might cross back and forth several times. The following excerpt from a debate midrash session devoted to the question "Should boys cover their heads for *limudei kodesh*? [sacred learning]" exemplifies the ritual or behavioral aspects of "being engaged."¹⁰

Teacher 1 (pro, wearing a kippah)¹¹: *In the entire world, you take your hat off as a sign of respect. For a Jew, everybody needs to have their head covered; this is a sign of respect.*

Boy (con): [reads from a text he brought and says it is only a custom not a halacha]

Boy (wearing a kippah): [goes up and looks for a Talmud passage to refute this argument]

Girl (pro, wearing a kippah): *It is a minhag (custom), but a symbol of learning, and we should respect the learning.*

¹⁰ This question comes from the more stringent position, where only boys are required to cover their heads when studying sacred texts.

¹¹ A *kippah* is a skullcap, generally worn by observant males all the time, but certainly when they pray or study sacred texts. In egalitarian settings, females may also do this. Halacha is the Jewish codification of law about practices. *Gemara* is the classical text in which the ancient rabbis debated matters of textual interpretation and *halacha* (Jewish law).

Boy (con): *It has become a symbol of observance. It is all about division, not about learning, I do not feel differently when I study, and I should not be obliged to wear a kippah.*

Teacher2 (con, wearing a kippah): *It bothers me emotionally to see somebody without a kippah learning, but I am against making it a required practice because I see it as a very powerful symbolic act that somebody can study without a kippah. It means that the most secular person can have a claim on these texts. Kippah can also be divisive, kippah srugah, where you wear it on your head.... or if you wear a hat.... kippah defines and divides Jews¹².*

Teacher 1 [who originally advocated wearing a kippah, moves to the other side, joining teacher 2]

This model of pluralism as active engagement through argumentation serves as a catalyst for understanding the limits of people's beliefs and actions. As Greenberg explains in *Sh'ma* (March 2006), "pluralism comes out of the necessity to understand that even absolute truths have limits." An engaged pluralism is seen at Tichon as a spicing element which will shake the tendency of the culture to go dormant; it will push people to explore their limits. For teachers and administrators, then,, pluralism is a process¹³ that will help the school stay an exciting place. In the words of an administrator: "...we need to revitalize the school atmosphere and again ask difficult questions."

Pluralism as a "Safe Enough" Place¹⁴

While learning generally needs a safe space in which to flourish, emotional safety is even more critical when participants are asked to engage deliberately around their differences as well as their commonalities. All groups and individuals need to feel comfortable surfacing their viewpoints and questioning the views of others. This is especially challenging when it comes to children and adolescents who are concerned about their status within their peer groups. For people who are not versed in the texts, this privileging of argumentation and texts can be daunting. In this context, interpersonal feelings of trust are very important. Thus, teachers work to develop students' listening skills¹⁵. Even if a student is not as knowledgeable as others, the interaction should be "safe enough" to allow exploration of ones beliefs and assumptions.

Fostering a "safe enough" environment becomes a prerequisite to a pluralistic community¹⁶. Teachers spend time thinking about how potentially explosive encounters can remain safe. They try to make sure that students feel heard and that their feelings are not hurt. There is an

¹² The different types of head coverings generally symbolize different levels of traditional observance or affiliation: "black hat" being the most stringent, followed by kippot of various kinds. Particularly in Israel, a *kippah srugah*--or "knit kippah"--generally denotes a more moderate religious Zionist approach.

¹³ See Shevitz in *Sh'ma* 2006, in which she uses the metaphor of dance to explain the process of pluralism.

¹⁴ This is a play on D.W. Winnicott's famous phrase, "a good enough mother." Winnicott pioneered the idea of the "good enough" mother against the idea of the perfect mother. Here, we propose the same move. There is no perfect safe school environment, but we contend that, for pluralism to work, we need a "safe enough" school.

¹⁵ See S. Kimball and J. Garrison, 1996, for a discussion of the benefits and risks of the hermeneutics of listening. "Hermeneutic Listening: An approach to Understanding in Multicultural Conversations," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 15 (12) pp. 51-59.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that more secular teachers in particular tended to speak of pluralism in terms of a "safe place".

expectation that teachers will make sure that students will express themselves but also respect their fellow students when issues are potentially difficult or when students look unengaged. One teacher recalled how the 9th grade dean coached the teachers to include the unconnected, in her words: *"They'll come to the Shabbaton, participate, do things, but pay attention to the kids who stand alone. The rest will fall together. Take notes; keep an eye on them."* In the minds of these teachers, pluralism embodies a safe place where everybody is entitled to a different vision and connection to the group.

The following statement refers to the relationship between Jews and non-Jews and exemplifies that, for this speaker, being in a pluralistic environment that accept difference is the safest place for a Jew because being a Jew is to be different, and thus, living among strangers, a Jew will feel better tolerated: *"...as strangers, it is better for Jews to be in pluralistic environment,"* says a teacher. For this speaker, the referent is the other, in this case the non-Jew, and she makes an analogy to the situation at Tichon where the main ingredient of pluralism, in her view, is respecting difference and allowing students to explore different meanings while being accepted by the community:

"People are from a certain class—all Jews—but within this, people are very different from a religious point of view, and students feel free to express themselves. There is one school with different people—orthodox, liberals, etc. ... The students support being different, and it can be interpreted in many ways—different because of religious background, different because kids behave oddly."

In this speaker's view, the school helps "oddball kids" find their niches. Tichon, in her words, lets you be what you want to be in a supportive environment. This is an important characteristic of an environment that asks students as well as teachers to argue their positions. This culture, she explains, embraces diversity,.

She gives the example of a boy whose mother is Jewish but whose father is not. The student--very liberal, strong-minded and knowledgeable--dressed in black. He was part of a very small but very vocal group of students who objected to a school activity in which all students wore white and blue and formed the shape of a *magen david* (Jewish star, literally "shield of David") that was filmed from above by helicopter. This small group of students saw the event as a political statement of unconditional support for Israel and refused to participate. The student dean did not want to impose his views on the group and gave the group an opportunity to argue their case seriously. A compromise was found: the small group would be present at the ritual but stand aside while the others formed the *magen david*.

Another example of the focus of teachers on providing a safe enough environment is exemplified by the role taken by an Orthodox rabbi on controversial issues such as homosexuality. His traditional views, he contends, helped provide a safe space for the more traditional students who sometimes felt marginalized by the more liberal consensus on issues such as homosexuality.

As we have seen, Tichon presents pluralism as a pluralism of cognition, where multiple religious beliefs and ideas are legitimated and encouraged. Tensions with pluralism arise when actions about different religious rituals are required. Problems arise when it comes to the boundaries of what is acceptable. When this happens, fragmentations between different sub-groups become more apparent. As an Orthodox teacher said, *"In practices, we are more fragmented; maybe it is always a question of choices."*

Plurality of Meanings vs. the Need for Unity of Action

Having explored the language used by teachers and administrators and demonstrated that cognition is central to their vision of pluralistic education, we will now explore the tension between plurality of meaning and the need for a unity of action. In other words,; How can the school provide enough space for difference while maintaining a coherent vision of Jewish education? How can the school maintain space for everybody who wants to be at the table and still stand for something? What are the accepted limits of pluralistic behaviors? Does legitimating meanings mean that “everything goes”? Accepting different meanings does not automatically mean that it is legitimate to have different practices. What happens when the need arises, as it always does, to act, to determine policy?

The compromise found by the school’s administration is to have a space where the most stringent ritual position can be acted out but also to have space where alternative ways of observing the religious injunctions and engaging in rituals can be done. It is the art of finding a balance between plurality and unity. At the school, there are spaces where *halacha* (Jewish law) is respected in its most stringent formulation as well as a space for the many other ways of behaving. One example is its approach to *kashrut*. Early on, the school discussed its *kashrut* policy, and, at first, it was envisioned that the school might not have a kosher kitchen. It soon became unthinkable, though, that this school would be the first in the area not to have a kosher kitchen. The board and the headmaster needed to find a way to accommodate all parties whose place at the table they sought.

They developed a policy where the kitchen is kosher under the restrictions of “the *Va’ad*”,¹⁷ but the dining hall is not a strictly kosher space. Non-approved milk products are allowed. At the same table, one person can eat a very kosher meal while another is eating pizza bought at a local pizzeria¹⁸. The *kashrut* policy exemplifies the effort to balance multiple meanings with a unity of action in the school. For the speaker below, people need to eat, but in his mind, the school does not need to use the same stringent criteria for all other aspects of Jewish ritual life.

“Kashrut is an obvious choice, and it makes sense. Eating is pretty basic, and everyone needs to feel comfortable, but that does not mean that every other practice needs to be judged by the same standard of kashrut... The danger is when you use this standard all the way along. It does not mean that you have to apply the same standards to all issues under discussion. ... For example, take the use of electricity for the overnight on Shabbat; [Tichon] decided that in some places, electricity use would be permitted while in other places it will not. We decided against DVD because it is against the broad ways to define the Shabbat experience. [Tichon] tries to make compromises which will allow different kind of standards. For themselves, they [the more stringent practitioners in the community] can maintain their observance. There are constraints for everyone to have a space to have a Shabbat experience.”

For this speaker, pluralism does not mean that you have to apply the same standards to all issues of ritual under discussion. Tichon has developed a system where accommodations are made to both the more traditional and the more liberal sub-groups. This means that the positions of those who are at the table determine the nature of the practice; if the mix of people changes, the accommodation will also change.

¹⁷ The nickname for the official local certifying body.

¹⁸ Note that students cannot order pizza to be delivered to school, but they can bring a piece of leftover pizza bought from the same pizzeria. It is interesting to note that the faculty lounge has two microwave ovens: one kosher, the other non-kosher.

This approach can be found in all basic rituals such as the *minyanim* and *shabbatonim*. In the case of the latter, rooms are set aside and labeled non-*shomrei Shabbat* (Sabbath-observant) rooms where students can listen to music, use their cell phones and other electronics--things the more religiously observant can not do on Shabbat. When the school did *hatarat nedarim*¹⁹ before *Rosh Hashana*, they had an egalitarian *beit din* with a non-egalitarian *beit din* at the same table in the *Beit Midrash*.

The existence of the Open House (a gay-straight alliance) also exemplifies this balancing. After much debate, Tichon legitimated the club as a way to create a more comfortable environment for gay students and teachers. But it did not allow the creation of the advocacy-oriented alliance the gay students and teachers wanted. Again, the perspectives of the more liberal and more traditional members of the school community were balanced.²⁰

Another example is how Tichon handled a conflict about the 2005 prom. The school's unofficial policy regarding attendance at proms was "don't ask, don't tell." During the months leading to the 2005 prom, however, a student understood that bringing a non-Jew to the prom was not allowed and openly challenged it. As this became a topic of discussion between students and teachers, the administration was forced to come up with a statement about its position regarding non-Jewish guests. This opened up discussions of very controversial issues and brought to the forefront of the community difficult questions regarding mixed marriages, interfaith relations, what constitutes "Jewish dating" and "Jewish marriage," as well as where Tichon stands regarding Jewish endogamy and other values.

These issues made for explosive and difficult discussions between sub-groups of parents, administrators and members of the board. A board committee worked for many months to create "a statement on social events" that would strike a compromise between the different positions. There was much drama as the statement was edited and revised many times. A board member threatened to resign; some parents questioned having their children continue at the school. The draft of the statement that circulated for comments asked students not to bring non-Jews to the prom. In the end, the official statement later released by the school stressed Jewish continuity and Jewish identity and advocated dating within the group but stopped short of not allowing non-Jews to the prom.

The concept of comfort is very important in the language of pluralism. Tichon wants to create a space where most people are comfortable most of the time, but are also sometimes asked to stretch their limits for the sake of the community, and in some cases, are asked to tolerate some discomfort. While most Tichon constituents believe that Hasidic Jews would have no interest in joining a pluralistic community, this need to make all community members feel comfortable would hold true in such a case as well. According to the school head, should a Hasidic family choose to send a child to the school and the child had certain demands, the school would have to find a way to accommodate the student's needs. Tichon is committed to carving out a space for any individual Jew who accepts the premises of pluralism, i.e. learning to live with other Jews who are different²¹.

¹⁹ *Hatarat nedarim*---absolution of vows---is a traditional ritual performed before Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, to enable one to come before God without any unfulfilled promises. Three rabbis (or observant lay people) are needed to act as a religious court (*beit din*).

²⁰ A full exposition of this example is beyond the constraints of this paper.

²¹ The only exception at this point is regarding Jews for Jesus, who have not been included in the community because their faith requires proselytizing; thus, they are deemed not pluralistic.

The school, through a thorough process of reasoning, tries to find ways to have all who are at the table stay at the table. It is a case of “trying to make it work.” Thus, policy is established on a case-by-case basis through a process of thoughtful and respectful discussion.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that pluralism at Tichon for the faculty and administration is primarily cognitive, and that issues regarding pluralism in action arise in when people try to find places for themselves at the religious and communal table. This gives rise to the tension between the plurality of meanings and the need for unified action. The school has developed a system of accommodation—a balancing of multiple meanings and actions—as a way to resolve or live with emerging tensions.

This approach to pluralism leaves Tichon with some ongoing problems on the level of educational practice. As the school is process-oriented, some claim that content gets lost along the way. The approach is very pragmatic--similar to the rabbinic tradition itself, which is case-oriented and relies on discussions rooted in the interplay of many complex factors. It is through the solving of concrete problems, the handling of dilemmas that rise from the ground up, that pluralism is actualized at Tichon. Concrete problems demanding the attention of the community frequently arise. Examples--some of which were discussed in above—include how to spend Shabbat together; counting a patrilineally-Jewish student in a prayer group; whether to eat or pray on a trip to Auschwitz; acceptance of homosexuality²²; and who can be a prom date.

The rhythm of daily life at the school is framed by “incidents” where individuals bring to the consciousness of the collective their needs to be included, to have their “meanings” and visions taken into account. The collective then applies its technique of argumentation to find appropriate accommodations that include most members of the school community. Thus, responsibility for carrying out pluralism at Tichon rests first on the individual. It is the individual’s role to push the boundaries, to be active and to shake the consensus. We heard about many instances in which individuals who took the lead and asked the school to accommodate to something. In that sense, the Tichon model, with the focus on individuals’ concerns, is a very American way of presenting pluralism.

Tichon’s Jewish pluralism--in which people from different groups learn to accept one another and live together--is a practice where the individual student argues for his/her inclusion and the collective learns how to accommodate that individual’s needs. But it is a two-way street: the individual also learns to define his/her inclusion in a way that will fit into the emerging collective; at times, the individual is asked to make “sacrifices” or personal accommodations in order to be part of the Tichon community.²³

Careful attention to the language that teachers and administrators use at Tichon has revealed their underlying assumptions about the meaning of pluralism, especially in terms of the sources of pluralism’s authority, its purposes, scope and boundaries--that is, who makes decisions about issues related to pluralism; how such decisions are made; who is included within the institution; the relationship between pluralism within the Jewish world and the wider society; and the limits

²² When issues are politically charged, as in the case of the Gay-Straight Alliance, the administration will involve more stakeholders in the decision-making process.

²³ For example, in a focus group, students discussed the “sacrifice” of a female individual Orthodox student who was asked to trade places with a male from the egalitarian *minyán* so that the Orthodox *minyán* would count ten men and enable one person to say *kaddish*. (We collected many stories such as this one.) See Shevitz and Wasserfall, 2006.

of what is acceptable and why. All these issues manifest themselves in the school in ways that can be planned, such as in the formal curriculum, and in ways that spontaneously arise from the context, such as about the issue of non-Jewish prom dates. By examining what is made explicit in language and what is left implicit, we have gained an understanding of what individuals and groups believe pluralism to be in this day school setting.