

**Studying Pluralism in Jewish Education:**

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***Building Community in a Pluralist Jewish High School: Balancing Risk and Safety, Group and Individual in the Life of a School***

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### The Context

Reflecting on the meaning of pluralism in the spring of her freshman year in an intentionally pluralistic Jewish high school that we are calling *Tichon*, a girl told her class:

Well, back to the sacrifice thing. Sometimes you do see influences - I don't know if you call it pluralism, but I remember earlier in the year, when my friends who go to the *mehitza minyan*<sup>1</sup> and believe that [females] should not be counted in a *minyan*. And there were nine males in the *mehitza minyan* that day, and there were ten people in *egal*<sup>\*</sup> *minyan*--and someone in the *mehitza minyan* had to say *Kaddish*, but they couldn't because there wasn't a *minyan*. So [one girl] was actually willing to go to the *egal minyan* so that they could have a *minyan* [because a boy from the *egal minyan* came into the *mehitza* one] . . . so that the person in *mehitza* could say *kaddish*.<sup>\*</sup> I don't know how you categorize that, like what's that called? But [the girl who left the *mehitza minyan* and went to the egalitarian one] honestly believed that she should not be counted in a *minyan*, but she went anyway for the sake of someone who had to say *Kaddish*. And that was just--people do make sacrifices. So, even though you might not see it all the time, it does happen.

A boy who identifies himself as Reform concurs: "You can keep your own beliefs, but at the same time help other people acknowledge, accept and respect their beliefs."

### The Research Question

*Tichon* aspires to a form of pluralism that respects and develops students' religious differences. In 2006, the head-of-school's message on its website explained:

Jewish pluralism is a hallmark of our school. Our students represent a broad spectrum of religious, educational and cultural beliefs. *Tichon* is a place where Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform and Secular Jews can come together as a caring community in which to learn and to grow. Here we celebrate the values we have in common as we explore the important ideological differences that make us distinct. The pluralism we preach is one of engagement through which we challenge each other in the process of understanding each other.

The tension between, in this statement's words, "what we have in common" and the "important ideological differences that make us distinct" are visible in this discussion of the *minyan* decision. The student's ideological position is clear. Committed to the *mehitza minyan*, she neither dismisses nor denigrates the other *minyanim*. But she faces a dilemma. If she sticks with her beliefs and stays in her own *minyan*, another person is prevented from saying *kaddish*, something she knows is important. So a second commitment becomes a source of tension: being part of a wider community. The student expresses her resolution as a "sacrifice," neither taken lightly nor regretted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A *minyan* is the quorum of 10 needed for the group to include several of the prayers; more generally it refers to the group that is praying together. In the *mehitza minyan* males and females sit separately and only males are allowed to lead the prayers, read the *Torah* and assume other liturgical responsibilities. The *egalitarian minyan* gives equal opportunity for males and females to participate in and lead the services and allows them to sit together during the services.

<sup>2</sup>In a similar case another student is honored for helping to "make the *minyan*," by being called to the *Torah*. She feels proud that she helped the community, not upset by her compromise.

This case uncovers complex questions which are the focus of this paper. They are always under the surface at Tichon and other settings that value diversity: when is loyalty to one's own ideas and actions paramount and when are the needs of others in the community taken into account when religious belief is at stake? How does Tichon's emphasis on diversity affect its efforts to build a cohesive school community?<sup>3</sup> With its focus on the differences among people, pluralism can be seen as a centrifugal force that helps individuals and sub-groups develop their unique viewpoints. The concept of community, on the other hand, is a centripetal force that brings people closer to a shared core. If supporting individuals' diverse positions is essential to Tichon's form of pluralism, what does it do to harness centripetal, community-building forces?

This paper investigates how Tichon deals with these questions in its educational practice and analyzes what the practices reveal about its understanding of pluralism. It argues that two dynamics are fundamental to Tichon's efforts: 1) the need to create an environment in which participants can risk the differentiation, debate, discussion and openness to cooperation and change that is at the heart of Tichon's understanding of community and 2) the need to create a psychological sense of community in which "difference" is central to the conception of community.

This inquiry is part of a larger project that is studying how pluralism is enacted and understood at Tichon. During the 2005-06 school year the authors of this paper followed the incoming freshman class to see how they were being socialized into the school's conception of pluralism. This included observations in classes, at school events and committee meetings, in-depth interviews with thirty administrators and teachers, focus group with students and analysis of documents including student work, curricula, school papers and magazines, website and other relevant materials. Initial findings were discussed with faculty and staff.<sup>4</sup> We believe that the approach and methods we found at Tichon are applicable in other settings where the tension between the individual and the group are central to their educational approach.

### **Pluralism and Community at Tichon**

Tichon, in its eleventh year of operation, draws students from a large metropolitan area. The ninth-grade class that we followed consists of families from 35 towns. 37% of the families receive financial aid. As an intentionally pluralist school, it works hard to recruit students with a wide spectrum of belief and behavior patterns that range from secular through Orthodox, as long as

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<sup>3</sup> There is a well-developed literature about schools as communities, some of which links particular characteristics of the school community with positive student outcomes. Some focus on the classroom as the unit, such as Lortie's classic 1975 study, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Noddings (1992) and Sergiovvani (1994) develop theoretical models grounded in accounts of how school communities are developed and maintained and ways that they enhance student experience. Lightfoot (1983) presents portraits of different high school communities; Fisk (1991) portrays school communities that "work." Other writers present in-depth studies of a school community, among them Meier's "small school in Harlem, (1995, 2002), Peshkin's study of a fundamentalist Christian school (1986) and Sizer's series on Horace's high school (1996, 1984). Pekarsky (2006) and Pomson and Schnoor (2006) look specifically at Jewish day schools. There are also assessment tools that help schools look at their own characteristics, such as Shevitz (2005), Yale School Climate Studies, PEJE 2000, as well as from ISACS (Independent Schools of Central States) and NAIS (National Association of Independent Schools). Underlying this is a recognition that the nature of the community within a school shapes the learning that goes on in it. This stance is compatible with Jewish approaches to education since Judaism is a religion that is built the community experience.

<sup>4</sup> Statements in quotation marks are direct quotes from the recorded field notes.

these students are, in the phrase heard frequently in the school, “serious about their Jewish lives.”

While all high schools face the problem of forging a disparate group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders into a functioning class that assumes the school’s preferred values and norms, the problem of socializing new students in this school has an additional complication: its commitment to a particular type of pluralism. The school goes further in its pluralism than demographic and coexistence pluralism (Shevitz, 2005). It actively seeks demographic diversity and assumes that individuals and groups will learn to respectfully tolerate each other and the different ideas and ideologies represented.<sup>5</sup> As a senior put it in his graduation reflection, “During my time at Tichon I have learned the importance and necessity for tolerance. It is a message engrained in the very idea of Tichon --- a pluralistic day school tolerant of all forms of Jewish religious practice.”

But Tichon aspires go beyond diversity and tolerance by promoting what many have called “cognitive pluralism” which it defines as “. . . the ability to understand, hold, and grapple with multiple, even contradictory interpretations and perspectives” (Tichon 2005/Self Study, 47). It expects that students will learn to articulate their own ideas, engage with others’ idea, become more thoughtful and through this possibly change their own positions or together generate new approaches. As expressed by a twelfth-grade student:

The Jews are a wandering people, both geographically itinerant and spiritually roving. A Jew can never stay in one state of mind for too long. We debate; we change our minds; we amend. Everything I’ve learned at Tichon has bolstered this view. . . .Tichon allowed me to change my opinions and alter my beliefs in an environment where I can gracefully cede even my strongest certainties to new ideas.

Tichon expects people, through the pluralist encounter, to generate new personal and/or communal understandings and actions.<sup>6</sup> An administrator illustrates the concept by relating how

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<sup>5</sup> Walzer (1997, xi-xii) distinguishes between tolerate (the attitude) and tolerance (the practice). We understand tolerance in the positive sense advanced by Seligman: tolerance goes beyond the medieval notion of tolerance as the “ability to suffer and endure what was un acceptable but could not. . . be eradicated” and its more recent basis on legal rights.(Seligman 2003, 10-12). It now means the acceptance of difference. (Seligman 2004). Walzer, concerned with the varied political manifestations of toleration, makes the argument that in the post-modern world difference “must be twice tolerated – on the personal as well as political level.” (1997, 90-91) and Berlin provides philosophical grounding for a notion of pluralism that goes beyond acceptance of plurality to a radical acceptance of the existence of many truths (See Hardy 2002). Tichon’s form of pluralism incorporates these ideas as well as notions developed by Stone who defines pluralism as “coexistence with difference that is born out of an appreciation for diversity, multiplicity and particularity; and a recognition that distinct traditions and opinions are nonetheless, interdependent – that they share certain goals and common projects and therefore that social collaboration and legal interaction are both possible and necessary even between groups or individuals otherwise holding mutually exclusive, conflicting viewpoints, each deemed by the other to be in error.” (Stone 2003, 107) The diversity need not only be among groups; it can be within any particular group, as at Tichon. In such cases the challenge is then that people who hold very different versions of the tradition and culture have to tolerate, appreciate and work with others’ interpretations. (Walzer 1997, 65)

<sup>6</sup> This, as seen at Tichon, is similar to the pluralism advocated by Eck. It is “. . .engagement, involvement and participation. It is the language of traffic, exchange, dialog and debate.” (2001, 69) It is an ongoing, dynamic process that must be “claimed anew” as the context changes. (2001, 72)

a very traditional student from the mehitza minyan challenged a young woman from the traditional/egalitarian minyan to explore why she was not putting on tefilin (phylacteries) even though she was wearing a tallit (prayer shawl) and leading the service. This is seen as an example of Tichon's pluralism; it asks people the question, "within context of your own Jewish construct, how can you be a stronger Jew?" An example relevant to the school community is how it crafted a way to chant the opening section of *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals) that was acceptable all students, from the most liberal to the most traditional. Diversity at Tichon, especially around significant Jewish ideas and practices, is the grist for the intellectual and religious mill associated with generative pluralism.

Tichon promotes its cognitive pluralism through its formal and hidden curricula and by implicit norms and explicit instruction. It wants to enroll, in words heard repeatedly, "serious Jews" who will engage with ideas and texts. Teachers do not want "wishy washy students" but enjoy encountering adolescents who can "push back." They claim this is not an "anything goes" approach but one that wants students to justify positions with information and textual references. As a teacher sees it, "you need to understand that your interpretations come from your religious beliefs and you must be willing to interpret your rules for interpretation." Surfacing assumptions and recognizing principles one won't compromise is part of the Tichon experience. The same teacher who emphasizes that people must "do things for the sake of the community," recognizes that "sometimes you have to keep your own principles."

### **Enacting Pluralism at School**

Tichon asks its students to risk relinquishing certainty as they engage with people holding different ideas. Its commitment to this is nowhere more apparent than its *de-bate midrash*. The phrase itself is a play on the Hebrew words *beit midrash* – the traditional term for the "house of study" which in Tichon's vocabulary is also the large room in which the school community gathers for special events.<sup>7</sup> The process leading to a *de-bate midrash*, as well as the event itself, demonstrates Tichon's commitment to individuals' perspectives and group needs.

Several male upperclassmen complained that Tichon was becoming "less Jewish." Administrators first suggested that they bring their complaints and suggestions to the Rabbis' Committee that consists of the different rabbis who work at the school. This includes Reform, Conservative, Traditional, Orthodox and those who don't want to be labeled by a standard denomination. As the students entered the committee meeting, it was clear they were accustomed to speaking their minds. One charge followed another with the emotion of aggrieved adolescents. Finally some rabbis intervened by asking what they want to do about the situation. The students rattled off several ideas such as: the ninth-graders should have more mandatory prayer, Tichon should limit the number of students coming from public schools, and males should have to wear *kippot* when they study the Judaic subjects..." A *de-bate midrash* was called on the topic: "should boys be required to wear *kippot* for *limmudai kodesh* (study of Jewish texts)?"

As the *de-bate midrash* begins, a teacher stands in front of the large *beit midrash*, between the gathered teachers, students and administrators. People taking the "pro" position are on one side of the teacher, those arguing "con" are on the other and the audience in the front is made up of the undecided. As speakers make their points, some people move to the other side. Some people in the audience go to a side and others from a side might go to the audience. Any individual might go across a few times. The governing rules are that people take turns speaking in respectful but strong language; they are not allowed to use "mushy" words:

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<sup>7</sup> Although in the year of our study *de-bate midrash* happened only once, it is still described as a central feature of the school and there are plans to revive it in the coming year.

**Teacher 1 (pro, wearing a kippah)<sup>8</sup>:** *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.*

**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 Jews<sup>9</sup>.*

Many things are going on in this vignette. Students are comfortable airing their complaints to administrators and teachers who take them seriously and are willing to devote a precious resource, time, to exploring the topic through a *de-bate midrash*. Students and teachers are expected, in the school's words, to be "engaged" with the issue and each other. They develop arguments, citing texts and precedent, but also speak personally as did the boy who described how he feels when he wears a *kippah*. A teacher changes his position even while acknowledging that he is not necessarily comfortable with the outcome—"it pains me emotionally;" but he has been convinced that not requiring the *kippah* is the better option. *The de-bate midrash* is a public display not only of one's positions but of two other things: how well a position can be argued and whether a participant will allow him or herself to be persuaded enough to change positions. This cannot happen unless participants feel safe enough to risk publicly disclosing their ideas and changing their minds without fear of ostracism or ridicule<sup>10</sup>; this is part of what being in this community means. Focus on individuals' positions and a sense of safety are preconditions to the school's form of pluralism and are components of community building.

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<sup>8</sup> 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).

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> The only time the researchers saw any ridicule was at the Purim celebration where students poked fun at administrators, teachers and a few other students. Although Purim is a topsy-turvy day, the faculty was aghast that students were ridiculed.

The seriousness with which individuals' perspectives are taken, at least about religious matters, is reinforced by many aspects of school life. There are, to give one example, thirty-seven different prayer experiences available (they do not all meet every day), ranging from a *mehitza* and traditional/egalitarian *minyanim* to yoga, art and prayer and neo-Hasidic ones. And should a student not find one that meets his or her needs she can approach an administrator to create another, as did the student who "is angry at God" and didn't think any *minyan* addressed this adequately. Another student, believing that society's racial and ethnic diversity are not adequately acknowledged in the school, was empowered to find ways to address this.

An additional element of Tichon's pluralism is that the issues must really matter to the students.<sup>11</sup> When this happens they are a centripetal force that unites the students and teachers. Like the *kippah* question, sometimes issues emerge from the students. At other times Tichon tries to stimulate inquiry around issues students might care about but don't often explore: beliefs about God, Judaism, religious practice and meaning as well as social and political positions.<sup>12</sup> It structures programs that challenge students' self-understanding, such as showing a documentary, *Mixed Blessings*, about how four intermarried families deal with their religious differences. With students from intermarried families and others from families firmly committed to endogamy, the discussion about the film evoked deeply personal responses. In a small group debriefing one student, for example, told how her father tried to boycott his niece's intermarriage while another girl in the same session described how she is pulled by one parent who has become a fundamentalist Christian and the other who is an Orthodox Jew. The purpose of the encounters is for students, in the administration's words, "to take it [the presenting issue] seriously" and apply the ideas to their own lives. This process is fraught with risk, especially for adolescents who are exquisitely sensitive to their place in the group even as they explore new behaviors and try on new ideas.

### **Balancing Risk and Safety: Tichon as a "Safe Enough Place"**

Because Tichon requires that students and teachers risk self-disclosure and argumentation as well as the openness to change, it requires an environment in which they feel sufficiently safe to do this. Adapting Winnicott's well-known concept of the "good enough mother," we see Tichon as trying to be a "safe enough" environment that both stimulates differentiation and debate while providing support and acceptance. Many teachers and administrators define pluralism as a "safe place." Some mean that school is a haven from the harsh divisiveness of Jewish life. Others talk about how the school tries to create a safe environment for students to take these risks, which they see as central components of Tichon's brand of pluralism. That the content relates students' identities is no reason to shy away from it. From Tichon's perspective this is all the more reason to engage with the issues.

Tichon tries to structure a safe enough environment in several ways. It works hard to develop personal trust and understanding among its students and faculty. On the most obvious level it has incorporated many tried and true approaches to help build a school community. This starts at freshmen orientation where students coming from different communities and backgrounds

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<sup>11</sup> Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow asserts that many manifestations of pluralism in America are quite shallow and avoid the hard questions about the differences, pluralism and society. He advocates for a more "intentional" approach or what he calls "reflective pluralism" which acknowledges "how and why people are different (and the same.)" (2005, 286 -295) An example of the superficial contact among diverse groups is the "fiesta floor" in Lightfoot's (1983) portrait of the JFK High School's "Fiesta Floor." Also see Shields (2003) on multiculturalism in the classroom.

<sup>12</sup> A weekly all-school assembly, called *limmud clali*, is one forum where a wide range of speakers comes to introduce students to interesting, sometimes controversial, ideas.

interact so that by its end they connect with all the other new students. It includes the small advisory groups that serve as a place to raise concerns. There are dozens of experiential learning programs outside the classroom that let students experience each other, as well as the faculty and administrators, outside the academic classroom. The office of the director of student life is a hub of the concerns that the students bring. There are grade-wide and school-wide *shabbatonim* and weekly *limmud clali* assemblies that get the entire school to learn about interesting ideas, people, projects. The Experiential Education Committee monitors the scope and content of these programs. All this is in addition to a plethora of extra-curricular activities, including the standard sports teams and clubs. The assumption is that getting to know one another as individuals builds the good will and trust that will create positive interactions among students who hold different views and be “money in the bank” when conflict inevitably occurs. Some teachers believe that these non-academic environments are essential to students who do not shine in academic pursuits.

### **Vulnerable Student Groups**

Despite these measures to build a supportive community, teachers and administrators identify three groups of students they believe to be vulnerable: students with less Jewish knowledge, students with special educational needs and those whose religious practices are more liberal or more traditional than the perceived norm.

Tichon’s largest single group of students comes from Conservative day schools and many of these students have gone to Jewish camps and youth groups; they are described as the being on the “Schechter /camp 1/camp 2 axis” by some teachers.<sup>13</sup> These are students who teachers believe are really involved at school; they sing *zmirot* (special Shabbat songs) at *shabbatonim*, organize prayer services and so on. Teachers think that many students without this day school and camp background are “at the periphery” and wonder whether they can be prepared to really engage in the way the school expects. With Tichon’s high emphasis on rabbinics, *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible) and Hebrew, as well as argumentation and debate, these students are disadvantaged, a status that is reinforced by the tracking system’s hierarchical nomenclature.

Special needs students are also identified as vulnerable since they have to work hard just to keep up with Tichon’s challenging curriculum. They are often disadvantaged in an environment that stresses analysis and debate.

In addition, students who perceive their religious beliefs to be outside the center are sometimes concerned that their views will be minimized or, if an especially contentious issue is being discussed, in the words of a teacher, “bashed.” Tichon challenges students who hold more and also less traditional beliefs. As we saw in vignette about *kaddish*, they sometimes consider compromising a principle in order to support others. At other times there is pressure to fit in, if not at school then at social events outside school. Traditional students are also aware they learn less of the classical rabbinic texts than do students at Orthodox schools and that as seniors they will study the documentary hypothesis regarding the authorship of the Bible. They face dilemmas

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<sup>13</sup> The pattern of feeder schools in part explains the predominance of Conservative affiliated students. Five k-8 schools are Conservative or community and a sixth, also k-8, is intentionally pluralist. There is one Reform day school and a modern Orthodox k-12 school whose high school program was considered weak when Tichon was founded. Many observers claim that Tichon’s opening motivated educational improvements in the Orthodox school so that fewer students now want to leave after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The Reform presence, though small, is growing and there is concern that the Orthodox presence, with Orthodox students coming from the community school as well as the Orthodox one, be maintained.

around dress and behavior. In the words of a teacher, “it takes a special kind of Orthodox family to enroll their children here” and the teachers are aware that these students sometimes feel under assault by the majority’s more liberal thinking. Even so, students proudly identify as Orthodox and deeply appreciate being in this environment and there are students who experiment with and embrace Orthodoxy as a result the Tichon’s pluralism.

Some students from liberal backgrounds likewise feel that they are asked to compromise, though in their case it is to meet the needs of the more stringently observant students. They complain that the ideological seriousness of the liberal position is not always recognized. Students in Tichon’s wide middle range also face these issues though not as acutely. These students are hardly monolithic and are also tugged by different commitments. Thus, all Tichon’s students confront the question: when do I compromise, hold on to or change my beliefs? Tichon wants to make these questions discussable; it sees this as a characteristic of its engaged, cognitive pluralism. And this can happen only when its students, especially those who are vulnerable, feel safe.

### **Teachers’ Role in Enhancing Safety**

Tichon relies heavily on its faculty to create a safe enough environment in several ways. It assumes that the presence of teachers with diverse viewpoints and lifestyles is itself a powerful message. The range of faculty in terms of Jewish religious belief is immediately visible to anyone literate in the costumes of contemporary Jewry: men with hats, knit, cloth and no *kipppot*; women whose heads are covered and others wearing jeans and sweaters. The Rabbis Committee, with faculty and administrators from across the full spectrum of Jewish life, consider the school’s religious and spiritual dimension. There are openly gay/lesbian teachers and non-Jewish faculty and staff. Students recognize this and some value the opportunity to study with someone with different religious views than their own.<sup>14</sup> They also have ready access to teachers who share their religious perspectives, as well as challenge them – whether that is secular humanist or Orthodox.

The school deliberately has teachers with different points of view work together, especially when exploring contentious topics such as intermarriage, attitudes towards the Muslim world, or homosexuality. In the past year, the mandatory Pluralism Lab, taken by each 9<sup>th</sup> grader for one trimester, was co-taught by two rabbis who represent different religious ideologies. Students saw two authority figures respectfully disagree with each other and use information to bolster their positions. They modeled relationships based on respect and inquiry.

In a more active vein, teachers are alert to student discomfort. One teacher summarized the sense of teachers who make up the faculty’s Pluralism Committee:

The school is obligated to make sure -- once you’re in this school you’re protected, you’re safe, you’re respected. And you shouldn’t feel pain. You shouldn’t feel insecurity. There should be adult voices who can speak up, “No, I think this is a legitimate position.”

Many teachers take this responsibility seriously. After the documentary and debriefing about intermarriage, for example, several teachers met with individual students who were upset. One

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<sup>14</sup> Several talked about an Orthodox teacher who is popular even though she presents content that is arcane to modern and non-Orthodox students. The reasons for her popularity mirror the school’s values of privileging cognition and community. The teacher was described as “brilliant,” “knows as much as any man or rabbi”, really cares about the subject and is authentic.

boy felt marginalized because he is from an intermarried family; another, a teacher recalled, “was very angry that the school would show a movie like that, that seemed to be non-judgmental about intermarriage.” Before the ninth grade *shabbaton*, the freshman dean instructed teachers to “be very aware of kids at the fringes” and a secular Israeli teacher made a point of connecting with students who were not part of the “axis” of the more actively Jewish students. Several administrators and teachers described their offices as places where students who have concerns come to talk.

Tichon works hard to maintain the Orthodox segment of its enrollment; it is widely believed that if it loses its Orthodox population its community will be seriously compromised.<sup>15</sup> Teachers, especially those who are themselves Orthodox, go out of their way to try to support traditional students. Noting the liberal tendencies of most of the student body, they believe that when complex, controversial issues such as responses to homosexuality are brought up “the real challenge [is] not to the liberal position but to tradition. Would the traditional voice speak up?” One traditional teacher talks about how careful he is to present a “nuanced view” that might otherwise be lacking and reports that alumni have communicated the importance of this:

I dreaded going to the [whole school] meeting. It was going to be heavy and there would be tradition-bashing. I am struggling. . . to hold on to my faith. That [the teacher, an Orthodox rabbi] took that position made it ok.

Another graduate wrote that he saw things “as black or white” and that an Orthodox teacher

reminded me, by using texts, there are complexities. Not black and white. There can be texts that say homosexuality is wrong but others about how we have to treat people humanely.

While students from Reform backgrounds fit Tichon’s ethos more easily, we saw many examples when students or teachers had to remind people that “Reform is not less,” it is “other.” There is the constant need at Tichon to counter the Jewish community’s hierarchical assumptions that Orthodox is most religious and Reform the least.

Relying on teachers’ sensitivities to weave a safety net for students who may not feel comfortable is an ad hoc approach as the school grows, and it is harder for all teachers to be aware of the specific issues individual students face. Students might easily fall through the cracks, especially if the perception of a teacher who feels that the less Jewishly knowledgeable students are “disenfranchised” is correct.

Not pigeon-holing people with denominational labels is another strategy Tichon uses to create a safe enough environment. It wants students to figure out their approaches to Jewish life based on the principles and beliefs they hold rather than to cling to labels that might, some argue, be stifling or dysfunctional. They believe that this makes it easier for students to change and grow<sup>16</sup>.

### **Characteristics of the Tichon Community**

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<sup>15</sup> In the year following this research, the Orthodox population actually increased.

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes students and teachers are confused by the school’s reluctance to use the labels. They question why they can’t just call the *mehitza minyan* “Orthodox,” and so on. Students note that in any event they learn about the different beliefs of the denominations in the Pluralism Lab.

We have seen how maintaining a diverse enrollment and managing the risk of self-disclosure and argumentation by providing a safe enough environment for its students is essential to Tichon's pluralism. At the same time Tichon cultivates a sense of community without which its pluralism would collapse into disconnected sub-groups doing, to extend the early childhood metaphor, parallel play. Simply enrolling a heterogeneous population without helping it explore its diversity would be demographic pluralism rather than the engaged, generative pluralism that Tichon wants. What, then, unifies the different types of students? What provides the centripetal force that fosters community? How does commitment to the community develop alongside Tichon's efforts to support its diversity?

The tension between the individuals and the community is apparent from Tichon's mission statement. It states that Tichon aspires to be "a sacred community within the Jewish people" and form

a diverse and pluralistic community. Our diversity is a strength. An atmosphere of mutual respect provides a welcome forum for grappling with fundamental religious questions and individual Jewish identities.

The mission statement goes on to state that this "school nurtures a Jewish community characterized by a shared tradition, a common dedication to social justice and a love of learning." How does Tichon build this community?

Community is a core sociological concept, and it is interesting to note that despite its importance as a social phenomenon, scholars disagree about its definition and key attributes. In this paper we use the broad understanding of community as a group built on shared memories and aspirations (Arnett 1986). In this sense community is like an empty vessel that derives meaning from the content that enters it.

A sense of community at Tichon is clear. Students interact easily with faculty, administrators and each other in and out of the classroom. They seem at home in their space, using it respectfully yet fully. There are many informal areas where small groups of students catch up with each other, do schoolwork or just hang out. Even during large events like school assemblies and fire drills there is a sense of purpose, order and belonging. If anything, the pace is quick and the demands on students and faculty considerable. Teachers often joke about the ways that Tichon is their home.

Seniors' statements in the graduation booklet often refer to "community" which they associate with wonderful group experiences, deep friendships, relationships with teachers and other heartfelt memories that would be expected of high school seniors. But community has other meanings to them, as well. Typical statements include: "I have gained an understanding of how important it is for people to support each other." ". . . everybody has a different point of view.... I think our class is especially strong because we created a community in sincerity and honesty." "The community has been hungry for questions and open to different beliefs, and I have had the opportunity to observe both my own and peers' and my evolving sense of curiosity." And within such an environment, another writes, I ". . . learned patience and understanding of different people's ideas and views. . . while still being able to solidify my own beliefs and opinion."

Tichon teaches community in subtle ways. Teachers and administrators often use the word "community" in reference to the school community though it sometimes means the local, national or international Jewish community. They openly describe how they do things differently

than they otherwise might “for the sake of” the Tichon community, or to use the student’s formulation, they “sacrifice” for the good of the whole. A Reform teacher, for example, relates to her classes how she adhered to a more stringent form of kashrut for the school barbeque than she would in her own home. An Orthodox teacher participates in *shabbatonim* though he knows that some people do things that he believes are prohibited on Shabbat and does not want his children (who accompany him) to do. Sensitivity to the needs of others shapes faculty decisions. Students not only hear this; they see the debates and compromises in action.

Stories repeated at Tichon convey this. Sometimes they celebrate flexibility, such as a time the headmaster changed his mind about a highly charged issue or how Tichon added a more liberal *minyan* when challenged by a student who was Jewish by patrilineal standards and therefore not counted for the *minyan* in more traditional services. The oft-repeated rationale: If Tichon admits students who are Jews by patrilineal descent and requires them to pray, it is obligated to provide a real prayer option for them if it is to remain true to its pluralist mission. As a community, Tichon must make space for all its members.

Other school stories reinforce the responsibility of the group to devise solutions to community dilemmas. We repeatedly heard from students as well as faculty and administrators how, in its first year, Tichon prepared for its very first *shabbaton*. To paraphrase these accounts:

It was three hours before Shabbat and they still didn’t know how they would handle Shabbat observance and prayer. The headmaster put everyone in a room and said that they couldn’t leave before they figured it out.

Another story is told about prayer. Tichon usually conducts multiple services so that everyone’s ritual practices can be honored. After an emotional tour of Auschwitz, however, the students asked to pray together. Teachers recount with pride how students “grappled” with the issues and found a way that worked for traditional as well as non-traditional students. It is of interest that this frequently-told story omits the fact that one student felt that especially at Auschwitz she should not compromise her principles, in this case to egalitarian prayer. She prayed by herself, apart from the group. The story, with its omission, expresses Tichon’s faith that its students will be sensitive to the context but it leaves people wiggle room when it can.

These events, now part of the schools mythology, demonstrate that Tichon “trusts the process,” to borrow a term from social work. Sometimes it provides carefully structured settings, such as the *de-bate midrash*, to decide what to do. At other times the arrangement is ad hoc. In either case, Tichon confers authority on the group to make the decision, though the group is working within a known framework such as the expectation that there will be prayer or the need to respect Shabbat observance. The process is, in a teacher’s words, a “learned conversation:” through honest, probing and respectful deliberation the group will successfully craft an approach that meets everyone’s needs. When the process sidesteps the students because it is a particularly sensitive issue and takes place at the board level, students are chagrined, as the line from the student-written Purim *shpiel* (spoof), in which people in the school laugh about themselves, says: “Pluralism rules, subject to changes based on our whims.”

A student’s request in 2004-05 to bring a non-Jewish date to the prom is such an example. Some non-Jewish teachers felt delegitimized by the question itself: They could teach at the school but their children are not acceptable prom dates? While there was a *de-bate midrash* about the subject, the question was so important that the decision-making went to the board’s Committee on Religious Practices which was to recommend a policy to the board of trustees. According to the committee chair, in some sense the “fate of the school was at stake.” He

recalls that the discourse had become heatedly ideological; the committee was challenged to find a way to arrive at a solution that would be widely accepted. Traditionalists believed that a Jewish school should teach endogamy and not seem to condone inter-faith dating. Liberal families argued that since Tichon admits students who themselves have a non-Jewish parent, how could it not allow a non-Jewish date? Implications of the challenge were not lost on the students. As a teacher reported:

We talked about it in class and one of the girls said, “What does it mean?” She said, “My mother’s not Jewish, did not become Jewish, and I’m not Jewish. Am I allowed to come to the prom?” She was voicing some pain.

That Tichon accepts her as Jewish by patrilineal descent was not the salient fact to the student who perceived that her mother’s identity and hers were being threatened. A parent stated this more pointedly. He argued against the phrase being considered for the policy recommendation that “we advocate dating within the Jewish Community.”

We all agree that we should advocate that our children aim to create healthy families that maintain the vibrant continuity of Judaism, but we know from within our school community that there are many ways to achieve that goal, including marrying a person who converts to Judaism and even marrying someone who remains a non-Jew but happily raises their children to be Jews. We have both kinds of families among us. . . .

I do not think we should hurt these parents, nor do I believe we should be hurting their children by telling them that the choices of their parents were wrong and that therefore something is wrong with their families. I know that there are trade-offs to be made here, and I hope we can talk through even more fully these implications.

A compromise was eventually worked out: the school, while stressing Jewish continuity and advocating dating Jews, stopped short of not allowing non-Jews to the prom. This exemplifies Tichon’s combination of pragmatism and commitment to keeping the widest possible range of people, as we heard from several people, “at the table.” In the words of the chair of the board’s pluralism committee, “As soon as someone says ‘I can’t compromise, these are my principles,’ there is no room for negotiation.” In the pluralist school people must be “prepared in a limited way to compromise. . . for the sake of community.” Deliberations are structured to as much as possible avoid boxing people into rigid positions that would create an impasse and destroy the belief that a community that accepts differences is possible.

### **Balancing Similarity and Difference within Tichon’s Community**

The belief that a single community can embrace significant differences is the foundational idea behind Tichon. Whereas Jewish schools sponsored by the different Jewish denominations proudly stand for a set of core beliefs that they, to a greater or lesser degree, attempt to train their students to espouse and adopt, Tichon is built on students’ divergent sets of core beliefs about the nature of Jewish life and tradition.

In the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural context of contemporary America, the concept of community is itself adapting. Community was traditionally built on the assumption and promotion of sameness (Furman (2002: 51-54, Sergiovanni 1994). From a historical perspective, the tension between desire for a homogeneous population and the need to accommodate very real differences within the population has been a central theme in the development of educational

and other social policy.<sup>17</sup> As diversity has become a celebrated value, at least among some segments of American society, vexing questions for educators have been raised. They need to structure educational settings to support people's differences while simultaneously creating coherent social systems for student, teachers, administrators and, some might argue, families. To return to the metaphor introduced earlier in this paper, educators must somehow harness both centripetal and centrifugal forces in their work.

The notion of a "psychological sense of community" was developed by community psychologists in the 1970's as groups within American society faced the challenge of preserving their identities. Community psychology arose as critique of psychological interventions based on the individual, family or single group. Instead it sought to intervene in order to "prevent further social disintegration or deterioration in our communities" (Sarason 1997: 40) in terms of the inter-relatedness of the different communities, families and individuals. Three ideas are fundamental to this approach: people's need to feel part of a community, the erosion of minorities' cultures and the potential of using these cultures in positive ways to support group members' healthy development. Sarason, an important theorist in this field and an astute analyst of educational settings, asserted that people come to experience this psychological sense of community through four mechanisms:

1. perception of similarity to others,
2. acknowledged interdependence with others,
3. willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and
4. feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. (Sarason 1977: 157)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) further Sarason's ideas with both theoretical and empirical evidence, asserting that the four elements are manifest in specific ways, which are summarized in Appendix I.

These mechanisms provide a framework for groups' healthy development. The last three of these factors are amply evident, as we have seen, in the education that Tichon provides. But what about the "sense of similarity" in a setting that has no expectation that its students will enter—or exit—with the same sets of religious beliefs and commitments? What does "community" mean under such conditions?

Post-modern ideas about community posit that community under conditions of diversity has two components: "acceptance of otherness and cooperation within difference." (Furman 2002: 57) In such a community, rather than imposing, however gently, the views of the dominant group and downplaying the needs of the others, people feel responsible for cooperating with each other and finding harmonious ways to deal with difference.<sup>18</sup> In this sense pluralism is the "active engagement with plurality. (Eck 1993) As pluralism in American society needs "the

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<sup>17</sup> See Furman 2002: 1-12, 51-74 for a review of how the concept of school community developed, with special reference to the impact of diversity; also Shields in Furman, 143-164. Hutchinson (2003) presents a history of how the ever-growing diversity of the American people resulted in ongoing tension between the needs to preserve one's particular identity and to become part of American society resulted in ongoing policy debates; see especially 219-240 for analysis of post-1960's conditions; also Eck (2001)

<sup>18</sup> See Beck 2002 and Furman 2002 for a full discussion of post-modern conceptions of community and their implications for education and Tyack (2003) for an analysis of how public schools "sought common ground amid controversy and ethnoreligious diversity" (183) from the American revolution onward.

cultivation of public space where we encounter one another” (Eck 1993), Tichon provides the space for pluralism within the Jewish community to develop. This is how Tichon attempts to operate, whether on the board level (consider how it resolved the prom issue) or within its educational program (how prayer services or *de-bate midrash* take place). Tichon blends idealism and pragmatism as it resolves hard issues and tries to maintain a sense of community in which people are united by being different, by learning to respect others’ positions and by working with all sorts of Jews. Perhaps this is what is meant by the phrase so often heard at Tichon, “we are serious Jews here;” As long as students, on some level, agree with this claim, they belong at Tichon and Tichon can expect interaction and growth from the individuals’ and sub-groups’ interactions with each other. The paradox is that diversity, often a centrifugal force, becomes the centripetal force that unifies Tichon’s students, teachers and administrators in a shared quest for tolerance, understanding, debate and generativity. Indeed, when the centripetal forces grow too strong, Tichon’s pluralism is threatened; diversity and “otherness” fade into the background unless some crisis challenges the status quo in what Sarason calls a “shared valent event,” i.e. an important event, even crisis, that strengthens the bonds among members that brings people together. (See Appendix I.) At Tichon these shared valent events attract interest and energy specifically because of people’s commitments both to differences and to generating new approaches that work for the different groups. As seen in the prom and *kippah* case, these events are bi-directional; influence goes from bottom-up as well as from top-down and this powerfully reinforces the sense of belonging to a community and having a stake in its success.

### **Crisis Points: Challenges at the Boundaries**

The crises that erupt at Tichon are about its boundaries. Who the school should enroll is one such issue. Tichon’s diversity increases as it attracts more students from public or independent schools (currently 30%) without strong Jewish educational backgrounds. Will Tichon be a safe enough place for them to thrive even without the knowledge and tools to shine in debates about religious life or the skills to lead Jewish activities? Is Tichon’s focus on cognitive pluralism, as now practiced, limiting for students with strengths in other than the analytical and verbal domains or does it need (or want) to develop other approaches to pluralism? Some teachers argue passionately that there should be fundamentally different Judaic curricula available for these students that would not keep Hebrew, *Tanach* and Talmud as its core.

Tichon’s most difficult challenges, however, relate to the boundary between Jews and non-Jews. Who is a Jew and how ought the Jewish community relate to non-Jews who are linked to it through employment, friendship or family ties? As evident in the prom example, these questions sometimes threaten to disturb Tichon’s equilibrium. An acronym invented for the Purim spoof expresses some students’ observation: “APFEALAYJ”-- “a place for everyone as long as you’re Jewish.” This captures some underlying tensions at Tichon.

Faculty members disagree about the role of its non-Jewish members. While some non-Jewish teachers are more obviously comfortable than others –and specifically sought to teach at Tichon because of its accepting environment—others feel secondary. Some teachers claim that non-Jews’ perspectives are not actively engaged in most of Tichon’s pluralist discussions and when questions about the school’s relationship to non-Jews emerges, as it did over the prom question, some wonder about their place in the school. Tichon’s relationship to the non-Jewish world is implicit in its intense focus on pluralism *within* the Jewish world but not in relation to other groups. In the year of our study, there were no ongoing, meaningful interactions with other faith or ethnic communities. There is some social action that is directed towards the broader (not just Jewish) community, but the one ongoing relationship Tichon fostered with a nearby Catholic school has faded, in part due to socioeconomic differences, time pressures and other demands. In its characteristic responsiveness to individual students’ needs, however, a student

committee to look at the school's diversity in this wider sense was established after one student, who came from a public school, raised her concerns about students' limited awareness of diversity in this wider sense.

The question of the place of non-Jews at Tichon is just beneath the surface for students and families, as well. As the prom case reveals, complicated family commitments exist when a parent is a Jew-by-choice or is not Jewish. Non-Jewish relatives maintain their own valued traditions and relationships to the students and their families. Issues periodically emerge: Who is counted in each *minyan*? Who can come to the prom? How are the experiences and needs of families with a non-Jewish parent or other family member understood? Tichon both creates and thrives in an ambiguous zone and nimbly responds as questions arise. When particularly sensitive challenges arise, Tichon works hard to find a solution that keeps all its sub-groups under its umbrella. The solution often has two tiers: a more stringent position that includes a lenient aspect.<sup>19</sup>

Tichon will continue to confront its relationship to non-Jews both in and out of its immediate view. Messages about people's relative importance and ambiguity about its boundaries will create small crises for individuals and the school as a whole. From an educational standpoint Tichon needs these crises, since its approach to pluralism requires it to explore difficult, potentially divisive issues that matter to its students in a way that promotes self-definition, mutual understanding and growth. To do this successfully requires a "safe enough environment" and a "psychological sense of community" within the school. Its challenge is to maintain a community that enables all its participants to feel safe enough to risk self-disclosure, exploration of difference and the possibility of change while also maintaining loyalty to things about which they deeply care. Indeed, this is the challenge faced by all those institutions in a society characterized by diversity and choice that hope to foster values of tolerance, understanding, commitment and generative cooperation within an increasingly fragmented population.

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<sup>19</sup> See Wasserfall and Shevitz (2006).

**APPENDIX I: Community Elements (McMillan and Chavis)**

<b>MEMBERSHIP</b>	Boundaries	Marked by language, dress, ritual and show who belongs and who doesn't.
	Emotional Safety	Sense of security and willingness to reveal real thinking and feeling
	Sense of Belonging and Identification	Sense of acceptance by community and identification with its goals, approaches and people
	Personal Investment	Readiness to contribute to it in many ways
	Common Symbol System	Shared names, logos, styles, rituals, ceremonies, rites of passage, heroes, and others.
<b>INFLUENCE</b>	Bidirectional	Members feel empowered to influence what the group does; group has influence over the members
	Influence over Others	Members who acknowledge and consider others' need often most influential; those who try to dominate or don't consider others, often the least
	Trust	Develops as experiences accrue meaning to actions
<b>INTEGRATION AND FULFILLMENT OF NEEDS</b>	Needs	Includes what is desired and valued, including shared values
	Interdependence	Maintain this by giving or doing for others what is expected from them
<b>SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION</b>	Shared History	Participation and/or identification with it
	Contact	Greater personal interaction increases the likelihood that people will be close
	Quality of Interaction	Feel recognized and positive
	Closure to Events	Ambiguous interactions and lingering, unclear tasks inhibit cohesiveness
	Shared Valent Event Hypothesis"	Important events, even crises, strengthen the bonds among members
	Investment	The community becomes more important to those who give it more energy and time
	Honor and Humiliation	People who are honored by the community are attracted to it while those humiliated in front of it are distanced
	Spiritual Bond	A deep sense that this community and these people are important and deeply share experiences and perspectives

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