

Jewish Education Today Who Is an “Educated Jew”?

By Dr. Gil Graff

One of the pre-eminent scholar-practitioners in Jewish education from mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first was the late Seymour Fox.

Before moving to Israel, the Chicago-born Fox was among those who shaped the Ramah camping movement. In Jerusalem, he headed the Melton Center for Jewish Education at Hebrew University and later guided the work of the Mandel Foundation in its Jewish educational initiatives. For more than a decade, Fox worked with a team of colleagues on a project that he termed the “educated Jew.”

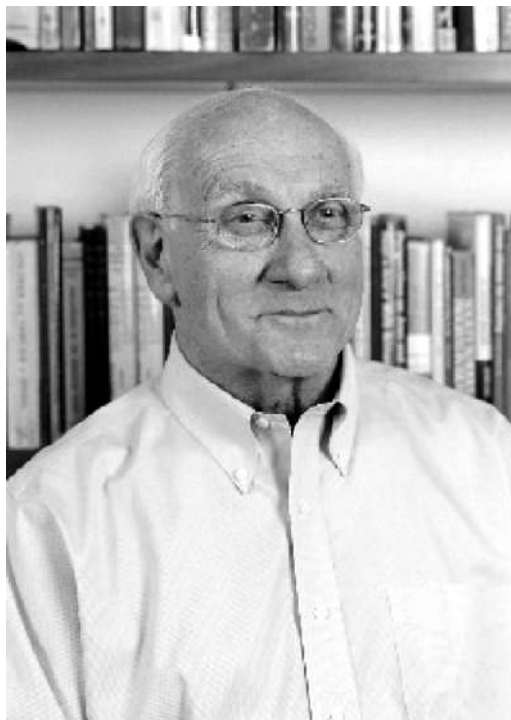
Fox recognized that – depending on a person’s understanding of Judaism or Jewishness – the picture of an “educated Jew” would look quite different. He undertook to identify what Jewish education might look like depending on whose perspective it reflected. Toward that end, he set forth multiple visions of Jewish education represented by several prominent thinkers of the late twentieth century and spanning Conservative, Orthodox, Reform and secular Zionist ideologies.

This work led to a book, *Visions of Jewish Education* (Cambridge University Press; 2003). Readers are introduced to a variety of perspectives on Jewish life, each of which informs choices in curriculum and instruction.

The “sea” of Jewish learning is wide and deep; no one – however highly motivated – will master the full richness of Jewish knowledge, wisdom, and experience. If there is a common theme among the thinkers whose “take” on essential Jewish learning Fox and his colleagues undertook to capture, it is that the “educated Jew” constantly strives to grow in their understanding and application of Jewish teaching to the circumstances of life.

The “educated Jew” is a critical thinker, though recognizing that Jewish knowledge and experience is far more vast than they will ever master.

What should be the “take away” of Jewish education? One notable interviewee in Fox’s project, Moshe Greenberg – a Bible scholar long on the faculty of Hebrew University – put it this way: “A Jewish education worthy of the name will address the



Seymour Fox, Jewish educational innovator and institution builder

hunger of the learner to know ‘whence he came and whither he is going.’ It will furnish him with value-concepts by which to infuse raw experience with meaning and order. The success of a Jewish education is measured by its adequacy in accompanying the learner through life as a treasury of concepts lending meaning to private and public experience”

More than two decades ago, Fox staffed the Mandel Commission on Jewish Education in North America, a Commission that published a report titled “A Time to Act.” Much action promoting Jewish educational engagement has ensued: from “birthright Israel” to the “Foundation for Jewish Camp,” from important initiatives in strengthening day school sustainability and affordability to re-imagining complementary Jewish education, from “PJ Library” to “Concierges for Jewish Education,” and more. Each of these efforts – many of them enabled by visionary philanthropists and foundations – has contributed to the Jewish education of thousands of participants.

Though the “educated Jew” remains difficult to define, of two things a person of this description is certain: there is more to learn and, what has yet to be studied or experienced is significant and worthy of life-long exploration.

As Harvard Professor Isadore Twersky advised the Mandel Commission: “Our goal should be to make it possible for every Jewish person, child or adult, to be exposed to the mystery and romance of Jewish history, to the enthralling insights and special sensitivity of Jewish thought, to the sanctity and symbolism of Jewish existence, and to the power and profundity of Jewish faith.”

And, I would add, to engage students in experiences that lead them to conclude (to paraphrase Hillel): Let us go out and learn more!

Dr. Gil Graff is Executive Director of BJE: Builders of Jewish Education. The above was provided through the Jewish Education Service of North America.

Rabbi Reflections Elders: Past, Present, and Future

By Rabbi David Weiner



On the odd occasion that I go to services, it doesn't feel right anymore. The people I grew up looking up to just aren't there. They created this warm, nurturing, strict environment for us, looking out for the kids, making sure we behaved ourselves, telling us off when we deserved it. It just isn't the same without them, and every time I go, I leave disappointed. The community I knew isn't there anymore. Instead there are all these people that I don't know and don't recognize, who don't know me either. It's not what it was, and I feel out of place. That's why you don't see me so much anymore.

I've compiled the above lament from conversations I've had over the last few years with several people around the communities I have served through the years. Their words clarify that elders, beloved or feared or both,

are a big part of what makes religious communities tick. They serve as a consistent presence and as role models for the younger generations. When those people move away or die, the sense of loss that remains can be alienating and overwhelming. It can be unsettling to hear the absence of particular voices and see certain chairs empty, and it seems like self-care to steer clear of the sense of loss.

Growing up in a number of different communities across the Northeast and Midwest and then serving congregations in the South before coming here, I had the privilege of sitting in the presence of a number of these elders.

I use the word ‘elders’ in the sense of respected, present, wise people – though there was often a correlation, these people weren't all advanced in years. Even as they sustain the community, the community keeps its elders alive. Who hasn't heard an elder respond to the question, “How are you?” with a laconic, “I'm here.”

I've learned to understand it as an echo of the prophets' *hineni*, meaning, “I am here, ready to serve.” Whether I knew them personally or not, those elders were an indispensable part of the synagogue atmosphere. I didn't always know the personal reasons – the sense of suffering or gratitude – that brought them to services, but, in being there for themselves, they were also there for me.

Today I bring my children to synagogue not only to make sure that they learn the service and get a sense of the sacred but also so that they can spend time with trusted adults who share the values and practices that make for a meaningful Jewish life.

Some of these people are my peers or theirs; still others are in their fifties and sixties, and some in their seventies, eighties, and nineties. Some are parents or grandparents; others have not had children of their own. Though my children cannot yet describe the experience in adult words, I am sure that these individuals are leaving their mark on them and their future. I appreciate their readiness to reach out in support, and I guess I can imagine myself becoming one of those people for others, in due time.

Many of us, it turns out, find this transition to be extremely challenging, and some of us end up singing the lament with which I began this column.

Accepting the role of elder involves acknowledging and celebrating age and life experience; it might seem hard to hold on to a sense of youthfulness and vitality at the same time. Perhaps we also think ourselves essentially different from the elders we remember from our youth – either considering ourselves more evolved or inferior in one way or another – and thus avoid presuming (or deigning) to fill their shoes.

If the presence of elders is essential to weaving the fabric of community and allowing the next generation to inherit a Jewish way of life, then we should not just acknowledge such concerns but also transcend them. Even as we continue to see ourselves as the children of the elders that came before us, can we also see ourselves through the eyes of younger generations? Will we take up the mantle of

being an ancestor?

Every *Amidah* we recite begins with a prayer that praises God as our God and the God of our ancestors. When I say that prayer, I often think about the people who made Judaism come to life for me as I was growing up, many of whom once sat in the pews of my home synagogues.

As we remember those people, noting the absence of many of them especially at Yizkor on the High Holy Days, I wonder how we will allow our sense of loss to influence our lives. Will we run away, frustrated and bereft? Or will we come to recognize that, for the next generation, the chairs we see as empty are occupied – by us?

Rabbi David Weiner serves Congregation Knesset Israel in Pittsfield.

Traveling with Jewish Taste® Rosh Hashanah Foods

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



By the time you receive this issue of the paper, you may already be setting your table for Rosh Hashanah dinner, and you are probably placing several familiar items there.

First and foremost is a round challah, whose shape represents the cyclical nature of the year. And, of course, we always offer apples to dip into honey, reflecting our desire for a sweet year. In fact, we are loath to include anything sour or bitter in our repast lest we bring sadness into our lives.

But, beyond these basic traditional foods is a host of others that reflect the Jewish love of both symbolism and wordplay.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Horayot 12A), the sage Abaye said, “Now that you have established that good-luck symbols avail, you should make it a habit to see *qara* (gourd) *rubiya* (black-eyed peas), *kartei* (leeks), *silka* (beets) and *tamrei* (dates) on your table on the New Year.” A parallel text in *Kritot* 5B states that it is not enough just to see them; we must eat these symbols of good luck. The Shulhan Aruch (Orah Hayim 583:1) agrees.

The first food mentioned in the Talmud as one that should be a part of our meal is the gourd, or more specifically the pumpkin. The word for pumpkin in Hebrew, *kara* sounds like the word relating to “read” or “proclaim.” Our hope, then, in serving a dish based on pumpkin is that our merits may be proclaimed.

Next we come to a culinary misinterpretation. An early translation of the Talmudic Aramaic indicates that *rubiya* are black-eyed peas, so dishes based on them became popular because *rubiya* relates to the Hebrew word *rov*, meaning “plenty,” something that we wish for in the coming year. However, the actual word for black-eyed peas in Hebrew is *luvia*. That hasn't stopped Egyptian Jews from enjoying them, as do Sephardic Jews who settled in the Southeastern United States.

Rubiya is, in fact, fenugreek. As we approach *Yom Kippur*, the day on which our fate is sealed, we certainly wish for our merit to increase. Of course, fenugreek itself has multiple uses: its seeds for spice, and its leaves as vegetables, both fresh and cooked.

Next on Abaye's list of symbolic foods is leek. In Aramaic *karsi* means leek, similar to the Hebrew *kara*, “to tear”. We eat leeks in the hope that our enemies will be torn out so that we can live in peace.

Rosh Hashanah offers the opportunity to prepare one of my favorite vegetables,

JEWISH TASTE, continued on page 17

JEWISH TASTE, *continued from page 3*

the beet. The Hebrew word for beet, *selek*, sounds like the Aramaic word *silka*, or “remove.” In other words, as with the leek, we

eat the beet in the hope that our enemies will be removed. But beyond that wish, the deep, rich red of the beet makes me think of royalty. We should treat others and be treated as kings and queens.

Everybody loves dessert, and Rosh Hashanah is replete with apple cakes and honey cakes. But, for evocation of the Biblical land, it’s hard to beat dates, the last item on our Talmudic list. The Hebrew word for date, *tamar*, is related to *teemayr*, “to rise straight up.” We wish to be righteous and erect like the palm tree. And, I would add sweet and sensuous!

We Jews have been around for thousands of years, and with every generation it seems that another symbolic food takes its place on the table. Among them is the fish head. As icky as this may sound, on many Rosh Hashanah tables you will find one, the word for “head,” of course, being *rosh*. In the coming year we wish that we may be leaders, or heads, rather than tails, or followers. Fish are also a symbol of the fecundity and abundance to which we aspire. If you don’t want a fresh fish, try getting a smoked whitefish that you can then serve at Sunday brunch.

Legend has it that the pomegranate has 613 seeds, the same number of commandments found in the Torah, so it is customary to partake of its ruby red seeds at the New Year in the hope of increasing the number of commandments that we fulfill. In recent years, the pomegranate has become an “it” food due to its wealth of antioxidants. The good news for us is that its new popularity makes it much easier to find the fruit in the grocery store.

A traditional food among Ashkenazim is carrots, and most often we find them in *tzimmes*. I have found several explanations for this inclusion. The first is that the Hebrew word for carrot is *gezer*, which is similar to the word *gzayrah*, or “decree.” At Yom Kippur, the Book of Judgment will be sealed with the decree for each of us for the coming year. A second explanation is that *gezer* is similar to *gazar*, or “cut.” We wish to cut down our enemies – I suppose if we put enough prunes into our *tzimmes*, we might just slow them down a bit.

Finally, the Yiddish word for “more” or “increase” is *merren*. We eat dishes prepared with carrots with the hope that we will have more of all good things, such as health, wealth, knowledge.

Having prepared all of the above dishes, your dining room table may be spilling over. Then again, a life overflowing with abundance and joy is precisely what our foods symbolize.

A happy and healthy and plentiful New Year to you all.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog “Food for Thought,” on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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Hoppin’ John

It’s customary in the South to eat black-eyed peas on Near Year’s Day for good luck. Some culinary historians believe this custom was adopted from the Rosh Hashanah tradition of the Sephardic Jews who settled there. This recipe accomplishes several things. First, it includes black-eyed peas, one of the Talmudic sage Abaye’s must-have list of symbolic foods. Second, it is a terrific dish to offer the vegetarians among your family and friends. Full of protein, folate, fiber, and vitamins A, C and K, it is very healthy. And, it is absolutely delicious.



Ingredients:

- 3/4 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 large onions, chopped
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 cans black-eyed peas
- Vegetable broth as needed
- 1 bay leaf
- Cumin, red pepper, coriander, salt, all to taste
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- Fresh spinach, kale, collard, or mustard greens, trimmed and washed

Directions:

- Heat the oil in a large, heavy pot and sauté the onions and garlic until the onions are tender.
- Add the beans and one cup broth, bay leaf, the spices, and canned tomatoes.
- Heat until the liquid and the spices are well absorbed. Don’t let this get too dry.
- Add the fresh greens about five to six minutes before serving.
- Remove the bay leaf before serving.
- Serve with rice and corn bread.

Serves 4 to 5

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