

## History of Education and Contemporary Education: Reflections on Jewish Education

Yehuda Bitty<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This research paper describes how pedagogical knowledge is constructed sharing the paradigm from the history of Jewish education. We discuss examples shared with my students during my lectures and where I try to build their own identity as future teachers.

**Keywords:** pedagogical knowledge construction, sharing paradigm

### Introduction

It seems that the discipline of "the history of education" has no chance; it has no "home". Historians see it as a subject in the science of education, while education specialists see it as a category in the field of history. Even if some scholars are studying the history of education, who is really interested in their research and who is interested in this field?

John S. Brubacher (1947) answers: "professional students of education will have an interest in the history of their profession because it illuminates the contemporary problems with which they have to deal". This paper aims to report on the evaluation of a course on the history of Jewish education that I taught for several years as part of the master's studies tract, at a Teacher's College, in Jerusalem, Israel: Herzog Academic College.

Twenty teachers - men and women - participate each year in this course. They are general teachers in elementary schools or teach various subjects in high schools. Most of them have no previous knowledge in the field of history - let alone the history of Jewish education - other than what they learned while they themselves were in school.

Each week during the course, they analyse a historical source that reveals an aspect of the history of Jewish education: from the Jewish communities of medieval Christian Europe to pre-modern North Africa, and from the Jewish school of the Italian Renaissance to the eighteenth century Jewish ghetto in Lublin. Using these historical sources, the students discover that the old and distant narrative is actually quite close to the reality that they face in their classrooms: the same dilemmas, the same difficulties and sometimes ... even the same educational solutions. Exposure to the history of Jewish education becomes an empowering experience and strengthens their professional identity as teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

---

<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Jewish Education, Herzog Academic College, Jerusalem, Israel, e-mail: [yehudab@herzog.ac.il](mailto:yehudab@herzog.ac.il)

To illustrate this argument, I will present two historical sources that we study in this course. The first one, written 1,500 years ago, describes the transition from familial education to institutional education in Ancient Israel. The second one is an image of a class in a Jewish school in Lithuania, at the end of the 19th century.

### **Towards Formal Education**

In the *Talmud Babli*, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology, we can read this interesting testimony about the establishment of schools in Ancient Israel:

- (1) "If not for Joshua ben Gamla, may his memory be blessed, the Torah would have been forgotten by Israel.
- (2) Originally, children who had a father - their father taught them the Torah, but orphans - did not study.
- (3) The Sages then instituted that the teachers of Jerusalem taught the children, but that was still not enough: children who had a father - their father would take them to Jerusalem, but orphans – were not brought and did not study.
- (4) Finally, Joshua ben Gamla instituted that teachers in all cities will teach all children".

According to this historical source, the original framework of education is the family (Ebner 1956). Teaching Judaism to the new generation is one of the parents' duties, in each family and not only in rich families, as was customary in Ancient Greece, for example. Not a cultural duty or a civil duty but a religious duty. The creation of schools "for all children", as we have today, is due to the fact that the family model "does not work": "*orphans - did not study*". At this point, the society takes over and organizes an educational system that also includes "*children who had a father*", to continue the basic duty of education for all the children and perhaps also to improve it by having professional teachers in place of fathers...

According to the curriculum potential theory (Ben-Peretz 1990), what is the curriculum potential of this historical source when we study it with young teachers interested in the current educational system and not that of 2000 years ago? This is an opportunity to develop a discussion on the role of parents in the modern education system: what kind of cooperation do we expect from them? Only to bring their children to school - as the laws of Western civilization specify - or actively participate in the educational process? Additionally, is it important for the teacher to be in contact with both parents of the child or only one of them? Which of them? The father? The mother? And what does a child who is studying with his parents feel? How does this activity affect the parent/child relationship? What does the parent think of his own parental responsibility?

These are some of the issues that occupy us after studying this historical document.

### **Tradition and Modernity**

At the end of the 19th century, most of the Jewish children in Europe were schooled. In France, England, Italy and Germany – where the emancipatory process moved quickly, most of most of the Jewish children studied in state schools, alongside their non-Jewish fellow students. However, in Eastern Europe - where the emancipatory process evolved slowly, many are the children continued

studying in the *Heder*, the traditional elementary school in these countries, teaching the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language (Katz 1987).

Usually only boys attended classes at the age of five. After learning to read Hebrew, they immediately began studying the Torah. They generally began to learn Mishnah around the age of seven and the Talmud as soon as they mastered the Mishnah. Repeating and learning the holy texts by heart were the main technics used by the teacher, known as *Melamed*. The age of 13 or 14 would mark the end of a *Heder* boy's education.

At the traditional "*Heder*", the classes took place in one of the local synagogue rooms ("*Heder*", literally "room") or even at the teacher's house. According to periods and regions, the teacher's salary was paid by the Jewish community or directly by children's parents.

Contrary to the position of the *Rabbi*, which was very respectable because of his high level of *Torah* learning, the social condition of the *Melamed* was at the bottom of the economic scale, in part because of the large competition: everybody could work as a *Melamed* (Stamfer 1988). If you know how to read, you can teach reading, without professional training, without particular tools. The *Siddur* – the daily prayer book – was the only textbook that you needed...

Most of the *Maskilim* (Jewish Enlightenment leaders) who studied in the *Heder* harshly criticized this type of educational institution and they participated– or encouraged - in the establishment of modern Jewish schools where secular as well religious subjects were taught: geography, history, arithmetic, German grammar and Russian language. They also denigrated the absence of suitable conditions for learning (dirty location, unsuitable furniture, unventilated space) and the fact that teachers lacked any pedagogical training and sometimes used physical violence instead of a didactic approach. In 1840, there were four modern Jewish schools in all of Russia (in Riga, Odessa, Kishinev and Uman) and the russification politicians viewed them as the main model for all Jewish communities.

However, for most of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe, this educational initiative was too radical. Jewish historiography typically views the emancipatory process as a slow, gradual and continuous transition from communal life in a traditional Jewish society, to a new life in a modern non-Jewish one. Throughout the 19th century, Eastern European Jewry found itself in a complex reality in which a spirit of modernity entered Jewish communities that still adhered to the values of past tradition, especially in the field of education.

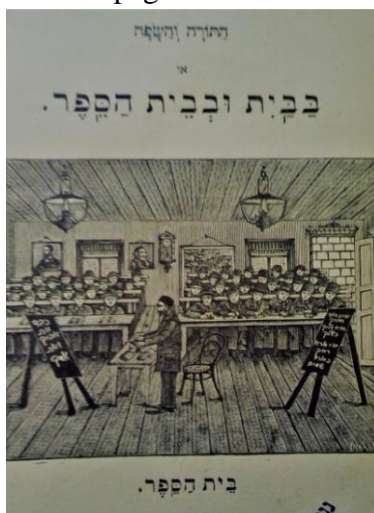
In this historical and sociological context, the emergence of a new educational framework, nicknamed "the revised *Heder*" is very interesting and not so well known, because it has not received much attention in historical research (Halevy 1976, Zipperstein 1983). The founders of the "revised *Heder*" wanted to create a new concept. On one hand a "*Heder*", a classroom for children from religious families, where most of the daily study would continue to be traditional learning, and on the other hand, a "revised" classroom, where instruction is based on modern pedagogic principles about teaching and learning.

This is the vision of the "revised *Heder*". However, in practice, how did it look? More like a *Heder* or more similar to a modern school? The information about the "revised *Heder*" that historians have is primarily based on polemical literature and fragments of memoirs. It is clear that these sources are subjective, reflecting an ideological context and they do not correctly translate the reality, even if they have a historical core.

Another interesting kind of historical source is a corpus of more than one hundred textbooks, which were used in this kind of school. Teaching by using textbooks specially written for children was an innovation in the world of Jewish traditional education. Browsing through these books allows you to be impressed by the general atmosphere of the class and to imagine teachers, pupils, benches, tables, etc. Some of them even include illustrations of children's daily life, such as home utensils, clothes, animals and toys.

### **Pedagogy as a Self- Professional Experience**

Abraham Baruch Temkin was a modern teacher in Vilna at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and he wrote several textbooks based on his professional experience. In one of his books— called *Ha-torah Ve-hasafa* (the Torah and the Language) –Temkin intended to teach both Biblical texts and Hebrew language - and by the way Russian language too- to Yiddish-speaking Jewish children. This is not the regular curriculum of the traditional *Heder*! This textbook is intended to the "revised *Heder*", as we can see on the illustration that appears on the inside title page of the book.



This classroom is a real modern classroom: with a large, clean and tidy room, with windows that can be opened, with oil lamps to light when it's dark and with a big wood stove for cold winter days. Pupils wear uniforms, they sit on benches and their books and notebooks are laying on school desks. The teacher has a special chair, he writes on the blackboard, and books arranged orderly in the bookcase. Of course, he's the only one who can look at the clock hanging on the wall behind the students and know when he should finish the lesson...

However, something is disturbing in the organization of this class: the teacher is not facing the pupils. Similarly, another curious detail requires our attention: there are two blackboards in this class - and not only one, as we use today. Why? It seems that this class is actually divided into two groups. On our left, these pupils are looking at the teacher who's teaching them, and only them. During this time, the pupils from the second group had a writing assignment: their hands are on the desk and not under the desk, like the first group. This is the reason why there are two blackboards in this classroom: two boards for two different groups in the same class. Even today, separating the class into distinct groups is a technic recommended for teachers who teach a class with many students or a multilevel class (Snow 1995). The difference between then and today is, that today, teachers apply what they learned

during pre-service training, compared to those days - when the teacher came to this insight himself, based on his own professional experience or on his colleagues' professional experience that they shared with him (Shulman 2007).

But every teacher who tried this technic knows that in practice it does not work very well ...pupils who are supposed to write the exercise listen to the second group's lesson and cannot always focus on their task. What is the solution that the teacher in the picture found for this difficulty? Looking at the two blackboards in the picture: there are two different sentences, one is short (only five words), and the other one is longer. The shorter one is a verse from the Bible (*Honor your father and your mother*, Exodus, 20, 12); the second one is a quote from an ethical tractate of Oral Law (*Let the honor of the other be as dear to you as your own, and the reverence for your master as the reverence for Heaven*, Avot, 2,10). Two different sentences from two different sources but around the same main idea and the same keyword: honor and respect. The solution that the teacher in the picture found to help his pupils focus on their task is to teach two subjects that are close to one another - despite the different levels of knowledge - and not to teach two different subjects. Thus, the pupil writing does not hear something completely different but words and ideas from the same vocabulary and the same semantic field. This solution is not a piece of pedagogical knowledge learned in a course in pedagogy or in a book on education and teaching. This solution is indicative of a pedagogical sense and of the teacher's ability to understand the difficulty of his students and to find a creative and useful solution. Teachers at the "revised *Heder*" did not learn pedagogy but they knew what pedagogy is.

However, what is, in fact, the topic of this lesson? Bible? Not exactly: half of the pupils are not studying Bible. Oral law? Not really: half of the pupils are studying Bible! The title of this lesson is "Honor and respect": Respect parents, respect teachers, respect everyone! Honor and respect as moral and social values. In fact, the subject of this lesson is values as the basis of an ethical society.

But, honor and respect are a Jewish value or an universal value? The "revised *Heder*"'s answer is clear: even universal values are learned from the sources of Judaism. Judaism has a special way to approach universal values. When the illustrator decided to share with us the special atmosphere of this educative framework, he thought what to write on the board. He could have written "*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*"(the first and famous sentence in the Bible, Genesis, 1,1) – to accentuate the traditional nature of the "revised *Heder*" or he could prefer an arithmetic exercise to prove the modern orientation of this framework. Nevertheless, he chose another option that expresses the special combination that symbolizes the essential character of this new educational initiative. This kind of image is not a naïve illustration: it should be seen as an ideological statement in which each component is well-planned.

## Conclusion

For young Israeli teachers, pedagogical knowledge, self-learning experience, modern identity and tradition values are contemporary education issues. Both of these examples clearly illustrate the challenges of Jewish education today.

According to Fox (2005), the primary purpose of Jewish education is not only to continue the existence of the Jewish people, but also to give meaningful content to the Jewish identity. This content is derived from the textual sources of Jewish culture but at the same time has meaning that is relevant to people



living in modern society and identifying with the values of this society. Fox often built his own teaching and educational analysis around Joseph Schwab's "four commonplaces," the key elements that obtain in any educational situation: the teacher, the learner, the subject matter and the "milieu" (Schwab, 1978). Of the four commonplaces, Fox himself acknowledged that the milieu was the least explained and most in need of conceptual development. For him, the "milieu" is the social and cultural environment where the didactic triangle is played out: the teacher, the learner, the material. The milieu influences the interpretation of the text, thus distancing itself from its historical significance. If this deviation is negative in the eyes of the historian, it is necessary to the pedagogical approach of the educator.

The study of the historical sources of Jewish education among Israeli teachers must therefore take into consideration the particular "milieu" and its role as cultural agent: in one side - professional identity development and in the second side - Jewish identity definition in a modern world. The two examples presented in this short article illustrate the "translation" needed to carry out this educational challenge. In the words of Jonathan Cohen (2008): "Translating from principles deriving from the tradition of Jewish thought to educational thought and practice is a most complex matter".

## Bibliography

- Beijaard D., N. Verloop & J. D. Vermunt (2000). Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Identity: An Exploratory Study from a Personal Knowledge Perspective. In *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16 (pp. 749-764). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(00\)00023-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00023-8)
- Ben-Peretz M. (1990). Research on Teacher Education in Israel: Topics, Methods and Findings. In M. F. Wideen & R. Tisher (Eds.), *Research in Teacher Education: International Perspectives* (pp. 207-225). London: Falmer Press.
- Ben-Peretz M. (1990). *The Teacher-Curriculum Encounter: Freeing Teachers from the Tyranny of Texts, Curriculum Issues and Inquiries*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Brubacher J. S. (1947). *A History of the Problems of Education* (pp. 12). New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131724809340340>
- Cochran-Smith M. (2003). Learning and Unlearning: The Education of Teacher Educators. In *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19 (pp. 5-28). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(02\)00091-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(02)00091-4)
- Cohen, J. (2008). Introduction. In J. Cohen & E. Holzer (Eds.), *Modes of Educational Translation* (pp. 10-18). Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press.
- Ebner E. (1956). *Elementary Education in Ancient Israel*. New York: Bloch Pub. Co.
- Katz J. (1987). *Toward Modernity*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- Schwab, J. J. (1978). The practical 3: Translation into curriculum. In I. Westbury & N. J. Wilkof (Eds.), *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education* (pp. 365-383). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shulman L. (2007). Practical Wisdom in the Service of Professional Practice. In *Educational Researcher*, 36 (9), (pp.560-563). <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07313150>
- Snow R. E. (1995). Individual Differences and Instruction. In T. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Education* (2nd Ed., Vol 5, pp. 2759-2769). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Stampfer S. (1988). Heder Study, Knowledge of Torah, and the Maintenance of Social Stratification in Traditional East European Jewish Society. In *Studies in Jewish Education*, 3 (pp. 271-289).

