

How do we envision Jewish education for emerging adults? What should we teach and why? What kinds of young Jews do we hope to cultivate through our teaching and scholarship, our service and programs? These are questions that animate many of us here today. I want to suggest that we can draw on the insights of scholars who grapple with the crisis in American public life to inform our thinking about Jewish education. Over the next half hour, I will attempt to transpose some of the insights of scholars such as Sharon Parks – who we were fortunate enough to hear from this morning -- Robert Bellah, Parker Palmer, Robert Kegan and others to the world of Jewish education generally, and Jewish education for emerging adults specifically.

Allow me to sketch my argument for you: First I will explore notion of “the new commons”. I will suggest that the idea of “the commons” and “new commons” can serve as a rich metaphor to understand the changing nature of our relationship to Torah in the modern era. Indeed, we have lost the intimate relationship to our sacred texts that once allowed others to name us the people of the book. I believe this to be *the* major crisis facing the Jewish people today.

Second, I will offer four suggestions in response to this crisis that can inform our theory and practice of Jewish education. The last of these suggestions will be a new model for study with emerging adults that I call the “Third Space”.

Inside your folders, you will find an outline of this talk if you would like to see the argument in broad strokes. You will also find a copy of all the texts that I will be quoting from if you would like to follow along.

The Commons and the New Commons

Dr. Sharon Parks and her colleagues call our attention to “a powerful image buried deep in the civil imagination of American society,” called “the commons.” The commons is a term that finds its origins in England at the dawn of the industrial revolution. During this time open land was fenced in and privatized. A distinction emerged between public land called “the commons” where resources like pastures and water were open to all, and private estates called “enclosure”.

In the United States, the commons referred to the shared space of public life. In New England, the commons was often a town green surrounded by a

church or a general store, a meeting hall or a bank. In Middle America the commons might be the area around Main Street. On the coast, we could imagine the pier or the wharf. The commons was a space, in words of Dr. Parks, where “people gathered... for play and protest, memorial and celebration, and *worked out how they would live together.*”¹ This is critical. The commons is not just the sharing of resources, but the creating of public space of *working out how to live together.*

For in these public spaces -- the green, the pier, the downtown – it is not just that people gathered in large numbers. Rather, it is the kind of interactions people had that is noteworthy. Regular, sustained interactions with different kinds of people in a manageable physical and moral frame – these conversations – helped weave the fabric of American civil society.

Of course, we should not idealize the commons – though some do – as a paradise lost from a bygone era. The commons, says Parks “was always a mix of sins and graces.” Indeed, public life in the commons was often vulgar and rough; at times exclusionary or bigoted. But however rough it may have been, the commons did provide a framework of public conversation. Though not ideal, the practice of the commons was qualitatively different from the social networking of the internet, the screeds of cable TV, and the disconnected lonely crowds of shopping centers.

I have a very clear memory of “the commons” both as a space and practice from my childhood in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Growing up, nearly everyone I knew had a relative who either worked for the university or studied there as a student. At the center of campus was a space called the Diagonal Green, or “Diag” for short. It was, as Parks describes, that mix of “sins and graces where diverse parts of a community could come together and hold a *conversation.*” Thousands of people walked across the Diag every day, and underneath its hundred year-old elm trees, students strolled, professors held classes; university workers took their lunches. As a child I heard Yo-Yo Ma play a concert in the Diag; I saw Bill Clinton campaign for president; I stood in a vigil to honor the late Yitzchak Rabin. Unfortunately, the Diag was also the place where scores of homeless people slept, where drugs were dealt, where a teenager was stabbed to death one summer, where conspiracy theorists raised money for their outrageous causes. To wander in the Diag

¹ Sharon Daolz Parks *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith.* San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 9-10.

was to walk through civil society at work. It was the space where citizens in Ann Arbor learned to live together.

Few of us today enjoy such an experience of the commons. There are some notable exceptions of course – college campuses, farmers markets, the streets of smaller towns.

But increasingly, with the rise of global travel, instant communication, economic and environmental interdependence, it is hard to speak of single, manageable shared space or shared conversation. Thomas Friedman’s hot, flat crowded world just ain’t the Diag.

We are inhabits of a new kind of public life that Parks describes as “global in scope, diverse in character, and dauntingly complex.” This is what she and her colleagues term “the new commons”. (Think of the BP oil spill, or the housing bubble and recession as examples of this phenomenon). The new commons we find ourselves in is a swamp of interdependence, complexity and moral ambiguity. There is no longer a central space or single conversation that can hold the issues of the day.

The Jewish Commons

I have told you about the commons and the emerging new commons. Now, consider with me the following metaphor: I would like to suggest that just as we can speak of the commons in American public life, so too we can speak of a Jewish commons.

Allows me to explain: Over the last 1500 years, Jews have lived on different continents, speaking different languages, managing different political systems. But despite these enormous barriers, Jews were able to mark time together, to construct common values, to share a way of life. They did this, even while dispersed throughout the world by creating a culture of *Talmud Torah*, the study of sacred text. Jews negotiated -- in Parks’ language “how to live together” not by walking in a public square but by wandering in a page of commentary. In doing so, Jews spoke not only to their neighbors, but to those who lived oceans apart. Jews listened not only to their contemporaries, but to voices across generations. The philosopher Michael Rosenak has called this “the great conversation by way of Torah.”² The

² Michael Rosenak *Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge: Conversations with the Torah*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2001, p. 3.

American commons is a practice rooted in shared space, the Jewish commons is a practice rooted in shared text.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the Rav, offers a beautiful description of this phenomenon in his work “*U’Bikashtem MiSham*,” “And From There You Shall Seek.” He writes:

“[As a child] I had one constant companion, and this was – don't laugh – the Rambam. How did we become friends? It is very simple, we met! The Rambam was a permanent guest in our house... My father's lessons took place in the entranceway of my grandfather's home, where my bed stood. I would regularly sit on my bed and listen to my father's words... I felt that the Rambam himself was present in the entranceway listening to my father's words... I remember this experience from the days of my childhood. However, it is not a childish fantasy, it is not a mystic experience. It is a psychological and historic reality that to this day lives within the depths of my soul.”³

This is the Jewish Commons of at work. The Talmud, from 5th century Babylon, is commented upon by the Rambam in 13th century Spain. From there the conversation goes to the Ukraine of the early 1900's, to the home of Moshe Soloveitchik and his son, Joseph. And here we are today, in the early 21st century reading his words, perhaps imagining him in the room as well.

Torah study, as Soloveitchik describes it, is not just the scrutiny of texts or the parsing of laws. Rather, it is a great conversation through the ages-- immediate, vivid, and alive.

As he studies Jewish law, he is negotiating not only how to live in the present Jewish community, but how to be a part of Jewish history. His story is woven into the story of the ages, blurring time and making contemporaries out of historical figures.

This Jewish commons was incredibly durable, surviving nearly two millennia. It survived exile and expulsions, crusades and inquisitions. It survived even as the Jews spread to all imaginable corners of the earth,

³ Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. *And From There You Shall Seek*. [U vikashtem mi-sham] Naomi Goldblum, trans. Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 2008. P. 143-5.

living among vastly different cultures. It did not, however, survive the ruptures of modernity.

The New Jewish Commons:

Much as Dr. Parks speaks about the emergence of the new commons, we are living through the long, difficult emergence of a new Jewish commons. The experience of the last two hundred years – of emancipation and enlightenment, of secularization and religious fundamentalism, of Holocaust and independence – has fundamentally altered Jewish self-understanding. Today, it is difficult if not impossible to speak of any meaningful framework that all Jews share. Indeed, the fabric of shared Jewish conversation has frayed if not unraveled completely.

There are serious problems that result from the loss of a shared framework. Some of the biggest dilemmas we face as a people today – the relationship of the Diaspora to the state of Israel, the question of ‘who is a Jew’ and the proper use of Jewish power – all are questions that feel intractable because we lack a shared framework within which to have the conversation.

In terms of Jewish education, when we ask “*what should we teach to Jewish emerging adults and why?*” we are equally at a loss. How do we educate people into a culture if cannot agree on what that culture is? How do we teach a value system if we cannot articulate what that shared value system is?

I have described the emergence of a new commons that is complex, interdependent and morally ambiguous. I have asked you to consider this as a metaphor for the loss of “text-centeredness” that is a defining feature of the modern Jewish condition. We are today in a new Jewish commons without the shared framework of Torah study, without a shared framework for conversation.

How do we navigate and thrive in this difficult, new landscape? Or, in practical terms for us today– What should we teach our students, how should we teach them, and why?

Here again, I believe we can learn something from those who study American public life. I want to suggest four lessons that can help us in the field of education.

Lesson One – Identify the adaptive challenge

Ron Heifetz – whom many of you know -- draws an insightful distinction between adaptive challenges and technical challenges. A technical challenge is one for which we know the solution. For example, if a doctor has a patient come in with a blocked artery, this is a technical challenge. We know the solution, we can apply a stent or a bypass. But if the patient comes in after the surgery and says “I want to have a healthier heart,” this is not a technical challenge but an adaptive one. There is not one discrete solution for that. The patient has to consider her eating habits, how she exercises, what drugs she takes. She must examine the role stress and relaxation play in her life. She must learn ... how to adapt. Heifetz reminds us that technical solutions are clean, efficient and neat. Adaptive solutions are like wading through mud – precarious, slow going and difficult.

We have lost the Jewish commons of Talmud Torah. Yes there are many studying text today, but the vast majority of Jews are deeply alienated from the tradition of Torah study. This not merely a technical challenge of teaching large numbers of Jews to read Hebrew and navigate Jewish texts, though we certainly need to do that too. Rather, this is an adaptive challenge of finding a way for texts to make a claim on contemporary Jews, for Jews to find a way back into the conversation of Torah.

In identifying this as our adaptive challenge we are in good company. Almost 100 years ago, the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig spoke at the opening of the *Judische Lerhaus*, an adult Jewish education center in Munich. He argued that the dramatic changes of emancipation and enlightenment caused a “spiritual and intellectual migration” from Torah. Rosenzweig spoke of the alienation Jews of his generation faced when they encountered Torah. Rosenzweig pressed not just for education, but for a new approach to the text themselves. He described this approach an oft quoted speech

“This is [a] learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads to life, but the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law...back to the Torah...From the periphery back to the center...It is not a matter of pointing out relations between what is Jewish and what is non-

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Jewish. There has been enough of that. It is not a matter of apologetics, but rather of finding the *way back into the heart of our life*.⁴

“To find a way back into the heart of life” is a call for thoughtful, reflective adaptation. Rosenzweig further argued that we must find away for Torah to speak again with, “inner power.” The key term here is “find a way”. Rosenzweig does not offer a specific technical solution. In another essay he speaks of “a laborious and aimless detour through knowable Judaism”. This is a call to the slow difficult process of adaptive work.

Like Rosenzweig, David Hartman, the contemporary thinker, also built a center for adult education. In slightly different language he makes a similar call for adaptive work. He calls for a “re-engagement with traditional texts” with “a new orientation”⁵ Re-engagement speaks of an ongoing, dynamic struggle.

This is our adaptive challenge, to find a way to reclaim the Jewish commons of *Talmud Torah*, to re-inhabit the “great conversation.” But for that to happen, Torah cannot be simply a body of information, a history, a set of *halachot*, or a collection of folkways. We need a new way to relate to the experience of Torah study that allows contemporary Jews to again feel its “inner power”. Only this way will we find a way back into “the heart of life.”

But how do you do this? How *do* we relate differently to Torah? How do we re-engage the conversation?

Consider the second lesson we can learn from the scholars of American Public life: We must envision a different kind of student. We must cultivate self-directed learners.

The notion of the self-directed learner has gained a lot of traction in the last thirty years. Robert Kegan, the Harvard psychologist notes “some sense of central intellectual mission for adult education... beginning to crystallize... personified by the image of the “the self-directed learner.” Kegan follows Gerald Grow’s famous essay and defines a self-directed learner as one who

⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2002. Print.p. 97-99.

⁵ David Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition: An Ancient People Debating Its Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 160-161.

is able to “examine themselves, their culture and their milieu in order to understand how to separate what they feel from what they *should* feel, what they value from what they *should* value, and what they want from what they *should* want. They develop critical thinking, individual initiative and a sense of themselves as co-creators of the culture that shapes them.”

Kegan goes on to argue that a self-directed learner is uniquely suited for what he calls “the mental demands of *modern* life”. How so? In a traditional, pre-modern society says Kegan, there exists a “a fairly homogeneous set of definitions of how one should live.” That homogenous vision of the good life is supported by “the cohesive arrangements, models and codes of the community or tribe...” Education in a traditional, pre-modern society is a process of socialization into the tribe or community’s way of life.

Modern society, by contrast “is characterized by ever-proliferating pluralisms, multiplicity, and competition for our loyalty to a given way of living. Modernism requires that we be more than well socialized; we must also develop the internal authority to look at and make judgments about the expectations and claims that bombard us from all directions.”⁶

Most Jewish emerging adults are deeply ensconced in the modern life. Indeed Jewish emerging adults go to college in greater numbers than they do any Jewish ritual.

Most have never been socialized into the codes and traditions of traditional Judaism as their great –grandparents might have been. Many educators see this situation and imagine their task to be the re-socialization young people into a more traditional form of life. They use charisma, fear or guilt to sell a traditional lifestyle to young Jews. We lost so many people in the holocaust – they argue -- don’t you owe it to them to live a Jewish life and not give Hitler the final victory? We have all heard poor arguments such as these. To be clear, the term “traditional”, the way I am using it does not only mean observant. Using guilt, fear and charisma to convince young Jews to give to the federation, get a shul membership and support Israel is another way of selling a traditional life. It is simply the traditions of suburban Judaism instead of Jewish law.

⁶ Robert Kegan, "What Form Transforms?" *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Jack Mezirow, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. Print, p. 68. Mezirow et al. Emphasis mine.

I agree with Kegan. I do not believe in the long run that a free and open society can be effectively navigated by an uncritical, traditional way of thinking. Unquestioned authority, in the form of traditional practice, law or custom, or simply “the way we do things” is not a good solution for life in a free society. At its worst it devolves into the new fundamentalism we see everywhere. We have to cultivate students who are more critical, and systemic in their thinking; students who come to see themselves as co-creators of the culture that shapes them.

In terms of Jewish education for emerging adults, this means we must go far beyond teaching information and socialization. We cannot simply teach large numbers of people to read Hebrew, to make Kiddush, or take them to Israel and then call it day. Now obviously, these are all good things, let’s keep doing them, but alone they will just not do. We have to instead build a bridge for emerging adults to a place where they can forge their own mature commitments in Torah with integrity. This is, as Rosenzweig said, a “laborious and often aimless journey.” It is not clean or simple. It takes huge amounts of time and ongoing personal relationships between teachers and students. It is however necessary and right.

What does this look like? This is the third suggestion I would like to make. **We must cultivate the study of Torah with new habits of the heart and mind.** *Hovot Levvavot Hadashot*, we might say.

There is a powerful phrase in the scholarship on civil society that most of you already know called “habits of the heart.” The term became famous because of a book the sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote in the 1980’s about American individualism. But originally the term comes from Alexis De Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who studied Democracy in America in the 1830’s. He argued that the success of American public life, of Democracy, rested on particular traits in the American character. He called these mores, “habits of the heart” or “habits of the mind”. They are not just ways of feeling or knowing, but ways of relating to other people and the world. Habits of the heart and mind are ways of making meaning that sustain a culture.

To sustain a culture of re-engagement with Torah we must cultivate particular habits of the mind and particular habits of the heart. These are: **systemic and critical thought** and the practice of **wholeness and connectedness.**

Systemic: To think systemically means we see discrete units as parts of a greater whole with its own internal logic. For instance, I often introduce students for the first time to the concept of Shabbat. To study Shabbat systemically means that I do not just teach a list do's and don'ts-- such as “don't do work” and “do have dinner with friends.” Instead I ask students what they know to be prohibited on Shabbat. Most mention things such as “working or driving”. Then, I explain that there are in fact 39 *melachot* -- categories of creative activities – not simply “work” – that are forbidden on Shabbat. I note that each of these 39 creative activities are not a random list, but are a part of 6 bigger processes -- (1) the making of bread, (2) the process of leather work and writing, (3) the making a shelter, (4) the providing of fire, and (5) the transportation of objects, and (6) completion activities. Then, we examine how these 6 processes are a part of two bigger ideas: first the labors needed to complete the desert tabernacle, and second, the basic activities of human civilization.

Thus on Shabbat each discrete prohibited activity can be seen as a part of a greater system of abstention from 1) the universal activities that originally defined human civilization – agriculture, writing and building *and* 2) an abstention from the uniquely Jewish activities that tradition teaches our ancestors performed to build the tabernacle. This would be a systemic approach to Shabbat where small details are put into a greater pattern of significance.

Critical Thinking: Critical thinking happens when we question the underlying assumptions of our systems. Thinking about again about Shabbat, once I offer my analysis of prohibited activities on Shabbat, I invite my students to think with me: How did *these* categories come to be understood as prohibited and not others? Who decided that? What are the limits and possibilities of such a definition? Is this an honest read of the Torah's commandments? What were the circumstances that informed this definition? Can that definition be changed? If so, how? If systemic thinking asks us to see greater patterns of significance then critical thinking asks us to see how and why these patterns emerged.

These two habits of the mind – critical and systemic thought -- are objective in nature. When we use critical, systemic thought we are studying something objectively, at a distance, impersonally. While this is an invaluable way of

knowing, it is not the only way. Parker Palmer reminds us that objective thought does not fully capture how we as human beings come to make meaning in the world. When we come to truly “know” something we also experience connectedness to what study. We experience a relationship with our subject of study. And as we learn, we also come to sense what Rilke calls “a hidden wholeness” in everything of which we too are a part.

Connectedness and Wholeness. These are habits of the heart we must cultivate along with critical systemic thought.

Connectedness: Connectedness is a habit of the heart that asks us to consider how a subject “makes a claim on us”. How are we connected to the subject we study? In my example of teaching Shabbat, I will also ask my students to explore their relationship to Shabbat. I will invite them to tell their stories about how they experience Shabbat personally. I ask them to consider what, if anything, Shabbat demands of them and what they demand of her. We might reflect together how our relationship to Shabbat has changed throughout our life or how we would like it to change. These are all modes of inquiry that allow us to share our connectedness to a subject of study.

Wholeness is the other habit of the heart I want to suggest. Wholeness asks us to use all the parts of our self to relate to a field of study not just our intellect. We are indeed much more than minds. We are also stories, bodies, emotions, and spirits. When studying Shabbat I might spend a session singing *niggunim* or practicing saying *gut shabbes* to one another. I will ask my students where they feel Shabbat in them or where they would like to. How do they carry their body differently on Shabbat or how would they like to? I ask them to tell me how they relate to others on Shabbat. Do they feel a part of something bigger, or alienated? I will ask them to tell me about a story or moment that captures the essence of Shabbat for them. Wholeness comes not only from privileging the non-cognitive parts of ourselves, but from putting them in dialogue with critical and systemic thought. When we study the laws of Shabbat and then sing together and then tell stories we are in a space of wholeness.

This brings me to my fourth and final suggestions: convene the conversation.

The breakdown of the commons challenges us to rebuild civil society and reweave the fabric of communal life. I have argued that the loss of the

Jewish commons of Torah study also challenges us to find a way to re-engage with Torah. How do we begin to build a shared conversation?

Ray Oldenburg in his book The Great Good Place offers a helpful suggestion. Oldenburg speaks of a dichotomy between the formality and discipline of the workplace and the relaxed, more affective environment of the home. Between these two poles are ‘Third Places’, like coffee shops, bookstores, or community centers that are neither home nor work, but draw on elements of both. It is not the physical space that is important here, but the kind of conversation that can happen. These are spaces that plant the seeds for a practice of the commons to emerge again. Third Places are not the same thing as the commons, but they are a step in that direction. They are a way to begin to re-weaving the fabric of common conversation.⁷

I would like to re-purpose Oldenburg’s idea to the field of Jewish education. When I speak of a Third Space, I don’t mean a coffee shop or bookstore per se, but a conceptual space, that is neither entirely formal nor informal but more holistic. In short, a place where we go not for a seminar or a party, but a place we go to have a good, serious conversation. Our culture today is technologically connected by personally disconnected. Where can people gather as citizens, as human beings –face to face, in real time – and share conversation? These conversations form the basis of a renewed civil society. In the Jewish world we do not have enough spaces where can there be a sincere, honest engagement with Torah -- that dignifies both the rich tradition of text and honors our own alienation from that tradition. Such conversations would go a long way toward renewing the Jewish commons as well.

As a learning environment, the primary goal of the Third Space is to re-engage the study of Torah. It does this by studying creating a learning culture that, as I have said, is critical and systemic on the one hand and holistic and connected on the other. It is a space that seeks to ultimately create self-directed learners. What I am describing is a not reducible to a technique or trick. It is not a new way of teaching or setting up the room differently. Rather, I am speaking of a different orientation in Jewish education. Since these are broad principles, the specific manifestations of third space learning might look very different from one instance to another.

⁷ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York: Marlowe, 1999. Print.

And if you are wondering what this looks like, then you are in luck. Just look around this room at many of the talented educators and innovative organizations here. Tomorrow you will have the chance to study with teachers who aspire to be both critical and systemic, both holistic *and* connected.

These teachers span the spectrum of observance and denomination. They will teach with a variety of techniques and styles. Beyond all these differences, what they share is a profound commitment to helping emerging adults find a way back into Torah, to the heart of life. They demonstrate in their work, that the conversation of the Jewish commons in Torah can re-emerge in the modern era if we bring our full selves to the table and engage with sincerity.

I tried to transpose some thinking about American public life and rebuilding of civil society to the field of Jewish education. I described for you how the notion of the commons can be a powerful way to think about the tradition of Torah study. I have compared the erosion of the commons to the dissolution of the shared conversation of Torah study. Facing this crisis, I made four suggestions: 1) that we identify our adaptive challenge – in this case re-engaging with Torah 2) that we cultivate self-directed learners capable of navigating a free society 3) that we foster new habits of the heart and mind and 4) that we convene the conversation by creating a new kind of learning space which I call the Third Space.

Now I ask you: What are the limits and possibilities these suggestions? Where can they lead us, and what roads do they close off? Can this help inform our teaching, our research, and our organizational priorities?

I look forward to learning from all of you and the conversations in this room over the next two days. Thank You.