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A New Paradigm of Jewish Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

The Illiteracy of American Jews

American Jews, we are told, are illiterate.

In February of 2019, Peter Beinart and Daniel Gordis appeared together at Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel to engage in a public debate on Israel—but on one topic, they were in total agreement. Beinart called the American Jewish community "the most ignorant world Jewish community maybe that's ever existed." Gordis was quick to concur. "[I agree with] your point about the evisceration of Jewish knowledge in this country… This is a disaster scene."[1]

Beinart and Gordis were echoing the conventional wisdom among Jewish intellectuals. Perhaps the most prominent recent instance was Leon Wieseltier (2010), who savaged the American Jewish community as "the spoiled brats of Jewish history," lamenting the "thinness of Jewish culture in America," the "calamitous decline in Jewish competence," and especially the "noisy professions of their identity." Other expressions of this conventional wisdom are not quite as biting, but they are no less cataclysmic, often explicitly linking illiteracy with fears for the future, predicting a cultural collapse that will lead to demographic decline.[2]

What do we actually mean by Jewish literacy and illiteracy?

Notably, the conventional wisdom has generated significant philanthropic investment in educational projects and programs designed to address illiteracy for adult Jewish laypeople, such as the Wexner Heritage Program and the Florence Melton Adult Mini-Schools; for professional Jewish communal workers, such as HillelU; and more. This makes sense. "Illiteracy" seems like the kind of problem that education ought to be able to address.

But what do we actually mean by Jewish literacy and illiteracy in Jewish communal discourse? Unless we are clear about the problem that we are trying to solve, it seems hard to imagine that we will succeed in solving it.

When we talk about Jewish literacy, surely we are not referring to the capacity to read in one's native language, which hyper-educated American Jews can do in incredibly high numbers. Nor do we mean the capacity to read (or speak) Hebrew, which was not a widespread capacity prior to the rebirth of Hebrew as a spoken language in the late nineteenth century. Nor do we mean the capacity to access classical texts, which is an elite phenomenon, not a broad or mass phenomenon in the way that we imagine basic literacy to be. Perhaps we mean the capacity to read (or speak) any Jewish language? That seems to be at the heart of Wieseltier's critique, and it avoids the limitations of class and gender—because of course all classes and genders spoke Yiddish and Ladino and Judeo-Arabic in the places where those languages were common. However, even setting aside Sarah Bunim Benor's (2009) rebuttal that "Jewish English" qualifies as a Jewish language no less than many other Jewish languages, none of the philanthropic responses to the crisis of Jewish illiteracy have focused on teaching Jewish languages.

The Conventional Paradigm of Cultural Literacy

Instead, the contemporary concept of Jewish literacy—what we will call "the conventional paradigm"—is rooted in the work of literary scholar E.D. Hirsch in the late 1980s. First in a number of articles, and then in a best-selling book (*Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know,* 1987), Hirsch noticed that children who did not possess certain information were unable to do well on reading assignments that relied upon that information. Not surprisingly, poor children and children of color suffer the most. He argued, therefore, on pedagogic and ethical grounds, that teachers ought to present that information to those children as straightforwardly as possible, enabling their access to literature and other educational opportunities.

"To be culturally literate," Hirsch wrote, "is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (p. xiii). You need to possess that information, to have it in your mind, available when you need it. He continues, expanding on the possession metaphor: "Cultural literacy is represented by a descriptive list of the information actually possessed by literate Americans. My aim in this book is to contribute to making that information the possession of all Americans..." (p. xiv). For Hirsch, to be culturally literate is to possess certain information that is valued by the culture.

Within four years, this concept of cultural literacy migrated into the Jewish community, in the form of Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People and Its History* (1991). The title of the work is significant, consciously echoing Hirsch and anticipating similar works (e.g., Prothero, 2007 and Beal, 2009).[3] The concept of "Jewish literacy" was born and migrated into popular consciousness. What we mean by Jewish literacy is, then, something like this: knowing Jewish things. When we lament Jewish illiteracy, we are saying, basically, that Jews do not know the Jewish things that we think they ought to know.

Three Elements of the Conventional Paradigm

When we analyze this paradigm, we should notice three fundamental elements. [4]

1. Content

The content of cultural literacy,
the "what," is information, items of knowledge—names of people and places, names of books and rituals, dates, etc. This is why cultural literacy projects (Hirsch, Telushkin, and others) are so enamored of lists.[5]

2. Use

What do you do with information?
As we saw in Hirsch above, first and foremost, you possess it. Secondarily, you retrieve the necessary information, at just the right time, from its storehouse in the mind.

3. Purpose

The purpose of literacy, beyond the use of information by individuals, is to bring a culture together. Community is built upon the possession of the same information in the minds of individuals, which enables communication; when we know the same things, we are unified, and when we don't, we are fragmented.[6]

Combining these three elements, we can propose a more formal definition of the conventional paradigm of Jewish literacy: *Jewish literacy entails the possession of information that emerges from, provides access to, and promotes a shared Jewish culture.*

However, each of these three elements can be linked, as well, to a **critique of the conventional paradigm**. We'll consider these critiques in the reverse order—first a critique of this idea of the *purpose* of cultural literacy, then a critique of this conception of its *use*, and finally a critique of the *content.*

> What happens when we privilege certain kinds of knowledge over others?

Reconsidering the *Purpose* of Literacy:
The Problem of Pluralism

If the purpose of literacy is to bring a culture together—if information is to be shared not only across the cultural group in the present but even across generations—it must have a certain stability. In Hirsch's words, "stability, not change, is the chief characteristic of cultural literacy" (p. 29). We will seek those things that persist, rather than the new or the ephemeral.

Of course, nobody denies that Jewish culture (like any other culture) changes over time. After all, what Jews knew and did in sixth century Babylonia is not exactly what Jews knew and did in eleventh century Spain, which is not what Jews knew and did in sixteenth century Safed, which is not what Jews knew and did in eighteenth century Poland, which is not what Jews knew and did in nineteenth century Baghdad. In the modern period in the West, the habits and patterns of Jewish life fragment even further and more dramatically, including not just diverse interpretations of Jewish religious law but also counter-normative Jewish practices (i.e., practices that are self-consciously situated in opposition to traditionalism).

By emphasizing those things that persist, the conventional paradigm of Jewish literacy nudges us toward what we might call "Jewish mono-culturalism" rather than an appreciation of Jewish diversity. Jewish literacy thus tends to be linked to traditional texts. In fact, more specifically and more problematically, it tends to be linked to elite male Ashkenazi traditionalist culture. You need to know about Purim, perhaps even Pesach Sheni, but much less about Mimouna or Sigd. You should know about Moshe Isserles, but much less about Max Nordau—or Emma Goldman. You need to know about *Kabbalat Shabbat*, but much less about *tekhines*.

Now, all education is normative precisely because it places greater value on some things and lesser value on others. To emphasize unity over diversity, or to emphasize particular cultural products over others, is a choice, to be sure—but choices are inevitable. Still, we should notice the choices that we are making, especially the emphasis on elite male Ashkenazi traditionalism, and we should think carefully about our assumptions and their unintended effects. What happens when we privilege certain kinds of knowledge over others? We noted above that the conventional wisdom about American Jewish illiteracy has led to any number of educational interventions. But sometimes, because of the underlying Jewish monoculturalism of the conventional paradigm, our efforts to address literacy may actually exacerbate contemporary Jews' sense of exclusion and alienation.

Reconsidering
How We *Use* Knowledge:
The Problem of Cognitivism

According to the conventional paradigm, cultural literacy entails having a lot of information stored in the mind, available for retrieval when necessary. The conventional paradigm thus relies on what we can call a "cognitivist" conception of the mind, and of education. To explain this, we can briefly consider the challenges to cognitivism of three prominent twentieth century theorists of education.
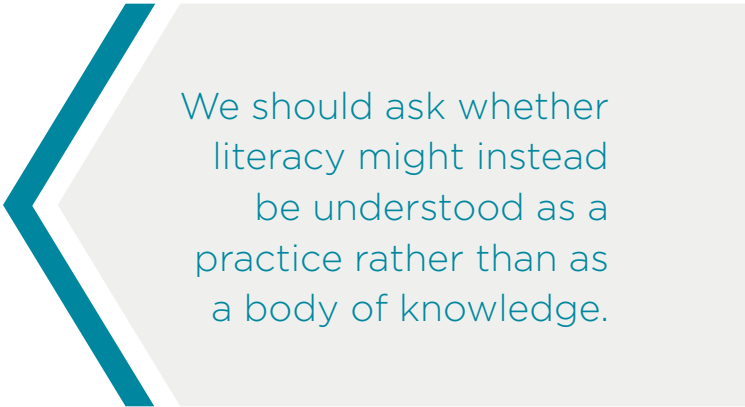
> Doing something, acting in the world, even carrying out intellectual practices, is itself an embodied form of knowing.

1. Just over one hundred years ago, Alfred North Whitehead (1916/1959) coined the term "inert ideas"— ideas that sit there, in the mind, with no interaction with other ideas or experiences. He argued that most of education has been consumed with the transmission of inert ideas, which he considered to be not just useless but actually harmful, because they promote passivity rather than activity.

2. About thirty years later, Gilbert Ryle (1945/1949) distinguished between what he called "knowing that" and "knowing how." The former phrase refers to information, and the latter to skills or competences. We imagine that the former is primary and the latter is secondary, but Ryle called this misconception the "intellectualist legend." Knowing how does not rely on a substratum of knowing that. Doing something, acting in the world, even carrying out intellectual practices, is itself an embodied form of knowing. We do not consult the reference work in our mind when our eyes scan the text on a page; we simply know how to read.

3. Almost fifty years after Ryle, Paul Hirst (1993) declared that he had renounced his own "radically 'rationalist' approach to education," according to which the pursuit of knowledge is the foremost aim of education. Instead, he wrote, "I now consider practical knowledge to be more fundamental than theoretical knowledge." His point was not to emphasize practical activity over intellectual activity, and certainly not to diminish the importance of rigorous inquiry, but rather, to reconceptualize intellectual activity as itself a practice.

Following Whitehead, we should ask whether Jewish cultural literacy entails the insertion of inert ideas into the mind. Following Ryle, we should ask whether we are buying into an intellectualist legend, according to which we first know a bunch of things, and only on consulting what we know do we determine how to proceed. Following Hirst, we should ask whether literacy might instead be understood as a practice rather than as a body of knowledge.

Take, for example, something as basic as *kashrut*. To be Jewishly literate means to know which animals are kosher and which are not, to know that kashrut involves an extensive set of regulations regarding the mixing of meat (including chicken!) and dairy, perhaps also to know that these latter regulations rest on thin textual bases within the Hebrew Bible about boiling a kid in its mother's milk. But what about actually knowing how to keep a kosher kitchen?[7] Or consider Shabbat. The conventional paradigm might emphasize the traditional laws of Shabbat, their thirty-nine categories, and the accounts of their origins as linked to the practices of the Tabernacle. But what about the embodied, practical knowledge of how to observe Shabbat, or indeed the knowledge of what that experience feels like?

If one operates within a set of cognitivist assumptions, the practical knowledge of kashrut or Shabbat is secondary to possession of information about those subjects. The latter is imagined to be the foundation for the former. The latter is what

> We should ask whether literacy might instead be understood as a practice rather than as a body of knowledge.

counts, culturally. But if we are willing to challenge those cognitivist assumptions, then we may envision a kind of literacy that does not involve being able to name and explain, but instead, involves being able to proceed within a particular cultural space—enacting the relevant practices and doing them well. And significantly, this reframing of what counts as knowledge involves also a consideration of the dynamics of both gender (because in Jewish life, as in many other locations, practical knowledge is more often the domain of women) and class (because practical knowledge is the domain of non-elites). When we ask the question of what kinds of knowledge are worth knowing, we want to consider what elite women have known in the past, and what non-elite women and men have known, in addition to considering what elite men have known.

Reconsidering the *Content* of Literacy:

The Problem of Technological Change

As we continue to reflect on the notion that literacy is about the possession of information—and more specifically that the content of literacy is information itself—there is a third fundamental question that we ought to consider, regarding technological advances. One response to technology is to maintain that nothing has actually changed at all. You can ask Siri to look up Maimonides, but you need some background knowledge to know whether you are looking for the name of a person, a Jewish day school, or a medical center. But this stance, that nothing has changed, seems hard to maintain. At the very least, the availability of resources online shifts the balance between knowledge of content and knowledge of the structures that organize the content, making the latter that much more important.

At a deeper level, the very assumption that information is contained within books has been disrupted. As a result, an often-unexamined aspect of literacy (i.e., the practical knowledge of how to use books in the very concrete sense of what it is like to pull a book off the shelf, hold it in the hand, open the cover, peruse it or otherwise assess its contents, and begin to access the information encoded within it in so many ways)—that kind of "functional literacy" is evolving.[8] We might speculate further that the availability of vast storehouses of information at our fingertips may have subtly changed our attitude toward that information, which we no longer aspire to ever possess. Instead, our concept of mastery has shifted—from possession to navigation, knowing our way around, knowing how to get what we need in order to do what we want to do.

But technological advances have done more than just enabling access to vast amounts of information; they have also enabled and encouraged the production of texts or text-analogues, not just consumption. According to Caroline Ho and her colleagues (2011, p. 2), "Being literate now means more than just being able to read and write the printed word." Instead, they argue, "students engage in a wide range of literacy practices in and out of school, which include the use of [new technologies] to create and recreate meaning, participate in communities, and develop identities as learners, individuals, and producers." In Jewish literacy, too, to restrict our purview to the consumption of the written word, as it is found in printed texts or even in online resources, seems far too narrow. Furthermore, this emphasis on production over consumption is a very clear way in which the kind of literacy that we're after is not an erosion of standards (i.e., settling for knowing less) but actually an elevation of our aspirations.

> Our concept of mastery has shifted—from possession to navigation

A New Paradigm of Jewish Literacy

A new paradigm of Jewish literacy will build on our arguments about substance, use, and purpose—arguments about the diversity of Jewish cultures, about the limitations of cognitivism and the priority of practice, and about how technological change disrupts our assumptions about possession of information and even encourages us to think about production as a basic literacy practice. To build this model, we need to return to a pre-Hirschian concept of literacy as a capacity to make sense of language and indeed other cultural products, and thereby to operate in a particular cultural space.

According to the conventional paradigm:
Jewish literacy entails the possession of information that emerges from, provides access to, and promotes a shared Jewish culture.

According to the new paradigm, on the other hand:
Jewish literacy entails the capacity to produce meanings, create artifacts, or enact cultural performances in a particular Jewish cultural environment.

The shift from the conventional paradigm to the new paradigm is, first and foremost, a shift from a focus on possession to a focus on production. Those who are culturally literate are not possessors of information; they are producers of meanings and of cultural performances.

We are calling this a "new paradigm," but we should also notice that, within the Jewish tradition, engagement with the textual tradition has always been understood as a productive act rather than merely an act of consumption or possession. As the great scholar Simon Rawidowicz writes (1957), the text of the Torah is "not a finished, independent, self-sufficient text, but one which is open and has to remain open to [interpretation]; more than that, one which demands [interpretation], obliges Israel to go on interpreting…" (p. 14).

We might also consider the way in which, in the Jewish tradition, the production of meaning is not only a private affair. Learning is always tied to teaching, as Maimonides writes (in his *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Torah Study" 1:1), "Whoever is obligated to learn, is obligated to teach." Isidore Twersky (2003) interprets this powerful teaching to mean that "even when a person fulfills this *mitzvah* [of Torah study] in solitude, it is to be understood as teaching oneself rather than learning alone" (2003, p. 89).[9] And teaching is an act of production, not acquisition, consumption, or possession.

What are the kind of Jewish educational practices upon which we can build?

What might it look like it we took the new paradigm seriously?

What might it look like it we took the new paradigm seriously? What are the kind of Jewish educational practices upon which we can build?

Taking the New Paradigm Seriously

While it is customary to lament the emptiness of many contemporary b'nei mitzvah celebrations, taking the new paradigm seriously suggests that **the ritual still has significant educational potential,** precisely because it is a framework in which young adults learn to do something that is real and challenging, and is performed publicly in an authentic setting. There is no need to limit this to reading Torah or leading services. In the b'nei mitzvah program at the Kavvanah Cooperative in Seattle, kids identify a particular cultural performance that they want to study, develop, and perform. One girl, for example, chose to become the leader of her family's Pesach seder. Doing this well requires, of course, sustained and rigorous study, but it also requires the development of her own independent vision of what the seder should be, and of the capacity to do the cultural work of leading—creativity and production.

Traditional Jewish practice does not have a lot of space for artistic expression, but if we take the new paradigm seriously, we would **cultivate opportunities for youth and adults to create and produce works of art**—music, dance, drama, creative writing, visual arts, and more. At the BIMA summer program at Brandeis, high schoolers who are passionate about the arts work within their chosen medium to create a work or to produce a performance. Notably, there is little anxiety about and no litmus test for whether the work is "Jewish enough"—because the focus is on the production of art, not the transmission of Jewish knowledge into the minds of the artists.

If we take the new paradigm seriously, we might **seek to promote Jewish cultural or religious practices among emerging adults**—for the purposes of the new paradigm of literacy, the line between culture and religion is not particularly important— instead of emphasizing cognitive learning. For example, OneTable promotes not just the adoption of the practice of Shabbat dinner, but more importantly, the development of the capacity of young adults to produce this practice themselves. Becoming a producer of this practice also means learning to hold oneself accountable for the norms of the practice—but this means meeting an (inevitably evolving) standard of a "good Shabbat dinner," not transmitting Jewish information to the participants. The goal is for the leaders to be active, capable, empowered producers of the event, and for the participants to be active, capable, empowered participants.

Taking the new paradigm seriously **might also affect how we think about learning Hebrew.** There are good reasons to learn to read Hebrew well, of course, but from the perspective of the new Jewish literacy, we ought to prioritize speaking— producing meaningful communications—over reading. This is only tangentially related to the existence of a Hebrew-speaking people in the Land of Israel, or around the world. The purpose is not to link Hebrew-speakers to other Hebrew-speakers, primarily, although that may be a side-benefit, nor to link them to the Jewish tradition only some of which is written in Hebrew (and not in the same dialect). Rather, the purpose is to provide students with a domain within which they are competent, within which they can actually do something, produce something meaningful.[10]

Even within the domain of the study of classical Jewish texts, taking the new paradigm seriously **might shift how we think about the work in which students are engaged.** When Jeff Spitzer taught the freshman class on Rabbinic literature at Gann Academy, his first unit culminated in the assignment to write a critical analysis of the position of the *Stam* (the anonymous voice of the redactor of Babylonian Talmud) in the *sugya*. This might seem like an unremarkable assignment, and indeed, in one respect, it is: We routinely ask students of English literature to produce similar kinds of analyses. But within the study of Rabbinic literature, this is doctoral-level work, and most of the kids doing this assignment had never studied Rabbinic literature in any depth before the class.

They did not know how to analyze the position of the *Stam*; they did not know how to take apart a *sugya* to find the voice of the *Stam*; they did not even know what the *Stam* was. The reason that Spitzer was able to give this assignment is quite simple: He knew that this was the cultural performance that he wanted the students to be able to produce, and he structured his pedagogy accordingly, with laser focus. Thus, within six weeks, the students were capable of producing these analyses.

This is some of what it might look like if we emphasize Jewish cultural production over the possession of Jewish information. The primary policy recommendation, then, is for educators and philanthropists to seek these kinds of opportunities, to design them well, and to support them.

But it is at least as important to articulate what we should *avoid* doing, if we are to take the new paradigm of Jewish literacy seriously. We should **avoid making lists of the topics and concepts and terms that Jews ought to know,** and avoid building curricula around those lists. We should avoid the trap of trying to assess the knowledge of those items of information. We should be skeptical of claims about "foundational knowledge," or about "the basics," which are typically a way of smuggling in cognitivist fantasies through the back door.[11] We should avoid what we might call the "*shanda* approach" to Jewish education, which worries about how our children or students will reflect on

us—"it would be a *shanda*, an embarrassment, if they did not know x or y"—and then generates learning goals on that basis, as if the purpose of Jewish education is for our students or children to not embarrass us at polite Jewish cocktail parties by not knowing something that they ought to know.

Finally, we should notice the occasional anxiety among educators and philanthropists that **some particular Jewish cultural practice is "not Jewish enough,"** and that the occasional response to that anxiety is to add some Jewish content and stir. There is certainly room for enriching Jewish spaces and programs, for raising the bar and sharpening our educational focus. The capacity to produce Jewish performances or practices does not preclude important and responsible questions about the relevant norms of those performances and practices. In other words, we don't just want people to produce; we want them to be able to produce well. But if we stop thinking about Jewish literacy as the possession of information in the mind, then we may be more attuned to and patient with the way in which different Jewish sub-cultures enact and produce diverse Jewish cultural performances and practices in different ways. A single criterion may not be relevant to all; indeed, it would be surprising if it were.

How Do We Choose?

If Jewish literacy is the capacity to produce meanings or artifacts or enact practices in particular Jewish cultural environments, then what, if anything, allows us—as educators—to prioritize or emphasize certain Jewish cultural performances over others? And what, if anything, holds the various forms of Jewish literacy together to address the anxiety about fragmentation that is part of what drives our desire to promote literacy in the first place?

No easy solution is at hand; no external criterion is available. We cannot simply resort to traditionalism without critically interrogating our often-ahistorical assumptions about what Jews knew or knew how to do. We should not assume that there is some foundational knowledge underneath the diversity of Jewish practices and cultures. Indeed, it may well be that the only thing that holds us together is… our quest for what holds us together. As Alasdair Macintyre once wrote, "If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew" (1977, p. 460).

And yet, we cannot and should not avoid the reality that contemporary American Jews experience illiteracy in very real ways—in feeling out of place, lost, uncomfortable, unable to make their way around or through particular Jewish cultural spaces or practices. Not all Jewish cultural spaces and practices, of course: Jews are rarely made to feel illiterate buying tickets for the Jewish film festival or walking through the lobby of the JCC. They may not know the daily liturgy, but they typically know their way around a Pesach seder. They cannot recite blessings without help, but they are comfortable with the basics of lighting a Chanukah menorah. In a previous generation, they knew how to buy Israel bonds; today, they know how to sign up for Birthright.

Still, there's a difference. Reminding contemporary Jews of all the things that they know how to do, all those cultural competences, will not be much good when they are insecure about paying a shiva call. While increasing openness to diversity of practice and the intellectual and practical assets that community members bring with them is surely a good thing,[12] proclaiming pluralism throughout the land will not change this dynamic. We have to accommodate and celebrate a diversity of Jewish practices, without giving up on our normative aspirations.

What this analysis suggests—and it is not a solution to the problem of pluralism, only a general direction—is that we ought to take our cue from the experience of actual Jews, rather than from any abstract conception of what is most important. We ought to be pragmatic. If Jewish literacy is the capacity to produce (meanings or artifacts) or enact (practices) in particular Jewish cultural environments, then what meanings and what practices are important to people? What are the cultural domains in which they want to be literate? What will enable them to feel, as a result of their productive or creative capacity, less alienated and more at home?

CONCLUSION

Why Literacy Matters

The argument pursued in this paper is not that we should ignore the cultural condition of American Jewry (although we should certainly be skeptical about apocalyptic claims about unprecedented illiteracy, presented without relevant evidence). It is not that we need not bother with rigorous educational programs or aspirational cultural projects. It is not that American Jews are just fine the way they are. We educators and policy-makers have plenty of work to do. But that work will not be effective if we misdiagnose the problem.

For the new paradigm, Jewish literacy matters because it is associated with agency, autonomy, independence, and self-confidence. When we think about reading in the narrow sense, we often focus on the way in which access to texts opens up new worlds of possibility, new horizons. That is certainly true. But someone who is illiterate can still be read to, or can hear oral accounts. So the significant difference is not whether they are locked into their own experience or whether they are able to transcend that experience. Instead, what happens when they learn to read is that they are no longer reliant on the other person; they are no longer the passive beneficiaries of someone else's capacity to access the text. They are able to transcend their own experience through an autonomous and volitional action. Likewise, when Jews become literate in the sense of developing the capacity to produce meanings or enact practices, they are no longer reliant on others. Producers begin to think about themselves differently, as **capable** and **empowered,** as **active** rather than passive, as having control, as doing things in the world rather than having things done to them or for them.

Jewish literacy matters not because of what Jewishly literate Jews know. In fact, ironically, Jewish literacy—as a capacity to produce—matters not because of what Jewishly literate Jews do. Rather, Jewish literacy matters because of who Jewishly literate Jews are and who they imagine themselves to be.

Endnotes

1. The event was recorded. The quotes are taken from the video, downloaded on February 27, 2019, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4H7hbb37kAU.

2. There are several reasons to be skeptical about this conclusion. First, the conclusion is almost never accompanied by any relevant evidence, and even if it were, it would almost certainly fall into the pattern documented by Sam Wineburg in which every assessment of historical knowledge over the last century has produced the exact same negative conclusion about students' ignorance, often framed in hysterical terms about the collapse of knowledge in the next generation (see, e.g., Wineburg 2004). Second, the conclusion echoes Simon Rawidowicz' famous observation, in his classic essay "Israel: the Ever-dying People" (1948/1974): "there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain" (p. 211). Third, contemporary anxiety over illiteracy is not unique to the Jewish community. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) write, for example: "The move into a more insistently, intensely multimodal world [generates anxiety which is reflected] in the jeremiads in newspapers, pronouncements by politicians, media pundits and academic commentators alike, about declining 'standards' in literacy and the collapse of the culture treasured by them" (p. 127). Finally, the anxiety about the future seems to cloud the judgment of the analysts, causing them to conflate lack of knowledge with an underspecified concept called "assimilation," which is in turn associated with exogamy in imprecise ways. All of this requires much more elaboration, which space does not permit here. But we can say that, in a general sense, the present essay adopts a skeptical stance about the conventional wisdom—not because of a Pollyannaish insistence that everything is wonderful, but out of a commitment to accuracy of diagnosis. If we misdiagnose, we will also mis-prescribe.

3. Telushkin is explicit about his debt to Hirsch and aspires for his book to address "Jewish ignorance" and "Jewish illiteracy." He describes his methodology, which involved a collaboration with three other scholars and a further editorial review by other scholars. He does not seem to notice the paradox of claiming that every Jew should know the contents of a book that its author required the assistance of others to write. Nor does he seem to consider the possibility that Jewish Literacy is actually a familiar genre—a one-volume encyclopedia—with a spiffy new marketing strategy.

4. This structure is borrowed from the analysis of Hirsch by Gallagher (1992, p. 214).

5. In some settings, this element is, itself, a by-product of the demand for assessment: When we find ourselves in need of the ability to assess cultural literacy, then we may well come up with some proxies for cultural literacy that are easily and quickly assessable. This is what seems to have occurred in the Israel Literacy Measurement Project, produced by researchers at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (Koren et. al, 2015), which generated a set of "validated" multiple-choice questions about Israel. For a critical perspective on the Israel Literacy Measurement Project, see Hassenfeld (2015).

6. In Hirsch's formulation, "All human communities are founded upon specific shared information." He continues: "A human group must have effective communications to function effectively, effective communications requires shared culture, and shared culture requires transmission of specific information to children…" (p. xvii).

7. From the perspective being developed here, Soloveitchik's famous essay "Rupture and Reconstruction" (1994) describes the rationalization or cognitivization of practical knowledge—taking something that one knows how to do, and that under prior conditions one learned how to do through mimesis, and textualizing it. It thus elevates know-that over know-how, and it happens because of the unnatural rupture of organic communities and the disruption of mimetic learning that was brought about by dislocations of the twentieth century in Europe.

8. The phrase is from Alan Liu, a theorist of the digital humanities, who writes: "Functional literacy … begins even before the mastery of written language when one first internalizes the book as a unified perceptual field in which simply seeing, touching and smelling the codex summons up bodily/mental programs for making it 'work'… [However,] online reading is reconfiguring the sensory bindings or manifold of literacy" (2014, p. 277). We might notice that the kind of codex-linked functional literacy that many of us take for granted will turn out to be a blip in the course of human history, beginning (not just with development of text-related technologies such as punctuation, spacing, readable fonts, all leading up to the invention of the printing press, but actually later) with the mass production of books that made them cheap and plentiful in the West from about the middle of the nineteenth century and ending with the migration of texts online in the beginning of the twentieth. Books existed before this time period and will continue to exist after it. But it will only have been in this particular period—less than two centuries—when the book will have had the particular cultural meaning that it has for most of us.

9. This sentence and the rest of the Supplement, the editors explain (p. 93, n. 1), emerged from the notes of meetings between Twersky and others, which were reviewed and approved by him prior to his passing.

10. It is also the case that the capacity to produce affects how one thinks about oneself—we become what we do (Levisohn, 2019)—which then creates a connection with others who share that identity.

11. While the present essay is not the place to develop this point, we would argue that this is true even for claims about the foundational status of biblical passages—a status that is grounded in the Protestantization of Jewish culture in the modern West rather than in any traditional Jewish idea.

12. In the field of general education, scholars write about "inventory" models as opposed to "deficit" models (i.e., focusing on what students bring to the table rather than what they lack) in the belief that pathologizing students, and seeking to remediate what is wrong, rarely brings out the best in them for both psychological reasons (nobody likes to be pathologized or "fixed") and conceptual ones (productive learning environments build on prior understandings rather than trying to fill in empty spaces). See the discussion in Zakai (2019).

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