

Reflections on Jewish Education in the Writings of Eliezer Berkovits

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Introduction

Much has been written about Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992) as a theologian and *halakhist*.¹ Berkovits's treatment of issues of religious faith—particularly, in the aftermath of the Holocaust—the covenantal relationship between God and the people Israel, the role and process of *halakhah*, and the significance and opportunity of the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in the modern State of Israel have been subjects of considerable discussion.² Though, in his roles as a congregational rabbi, professor of Jewish philosophy, author and teacher, Berkovits was, above all, an educator, little has been written about his reflections on Jewish education, let alone their relationship to contemporary thought and practice.

Within a few years of relocating from Berlin to England, soon after *Kristallnacht*, Berkovits published two books: *Towards Historic Judaism* (Berkovits 1943) and a collection of sermons titled *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Berkovits 1945). Articles and books that he authored over the ensuing forty-five years were, in many cases, expanded versions of ideas adumbrated in these early volumes. Berkovits's approach to the nature and function of Jewish law, for example, a topic which was to occupy much of his scholarly attention, is clearly expressed in these works, as are thoughts on Jewish education. Berkovits remained remarkably consistent in his thinking during the course of his prolific career.

During the quarter century that he lived in the United States—following four years (1946-1950) in Sydney—Berkovits was to articulate the mission of Jewish education, building on perspectives set forth in *Towards Historic Judaism*, his first published work in English. In such articles as “Has *Ivrit B'Ivrit* Failed?” (Berkovits 1954), “Jewish Education in a World Adrift” (Berkovits 1970), and “A Contemporary Rabbinical School for Orthodox Jewry” (Berkovits 1971), Berkovits returns to a theme expressed in his earlier work. “The aim of education is to produce a certain type of man....Religion is not a subject but an attitude towards life and its problems. It cannot be taught as a ‘subject,’ only developed as an attitude” (Berkovits 1943: 116-117). The goal of Jewish education, for Berkovits, is character development; instruction cannot focus only on a body of knowledge, it must nurture a Jewish worldview and attendant action.

In none of his writings does Berkovits provide a systematic exposition of what Jewish education would look like, to actualize his vision. In a doctoral dissertation, written in 1991, Sherry Blumberg explored the implications of the approaches of four theologians, including Berkovits, for educating toward “religious experience” (Blumberg 1991: 74-103). In her chapter on Berkovits—the only work to date that has treated the implications of Berkovits's thought for Jewish education—Blumberg characterizes Berkovits's theology as “essentially one of hopefulness.” Berkovits calls for a “return to Jewish roots and the sources of

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Jewish values...replacing a life built on trusting the Western value of power that allows the strong and powerful to act without consideration for the value of human life other than their own” (Blumberg 1991: 87). Based on analysis of a few of Berkovits’s published writings, Blumberg suggests that Berkovits’s Jewish educational model would include the study of texts as well as experiential learning; an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to learning; and examination and comparison of Jewish values with those of Western secular society. She notes that, though Berkovits was by no means insular in the sense of retreating from the world, he emphasized the need to look to Jewish sources for moral guidance. In his words, “Jews have to turn inward to our own resources of the soul and of spirit” (Berkovits 1970a: 10).

Berkovits categorically rejects moral relativism. As a corollary, he affirms that “every child has the right to learn how to distinguish between good and evil, between right and wrong, excellence and mediocrity, cheating and honesty” (Berkovits 1970a: 7). Permissiveness—permitting children to simply “do their own thing”—reflects, for Berkovits, the collapse of a value system; absent a sense of the world anchored in the will of a Creator, meaningfulness erodes. David Novak aptly observes that Berkovits was primarily an essayist; his ideas are not captured in a fully developed treatise (Novak 2003: 5). Similarly, Berkovits’s reflections on Jewish education were never formulated as a comprehensive curriculum. They are, however, rich in ideas to ponder, and thoughts that Berkovits articulated over many decades are increasingly embraced in the twenty-first century.

While there is much about Jewish education that can be gleaned from Berkovits’s published writings, the picture is broadened, deepened and sharpened by reference to his unpublished notes and lectures on Jewish education. These materials, written by Berkovits during his years in the United States for course presentations to students at Hebrew Theological College and a variety of audiences interested in Jewish education, express his sense of the educational challenges and opportunities of the time. They also clarify the currents of thought and practice to which he was responding. This article draws on archival sources as well as Berkovits’s publications to better understand his educational perspective and explores the application of his ideas to contemporary practice, extending beyond the scope of Blumberg’s work in each of these dimensions.

Early Observations on Jewish Education

In a collection of sermons that he delivered, 1941-1943, titled *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Berkovits 1945), Berkovits opined that “Just as the future of mankind depends on a successful moral re-education, so does

the future of our people depend on nothing else but on successful Jewish education.” Continuing, he affirmed: “There is no future for this people without nation-wide successful education of a Jewish character. If we achieve this, nothing can be lost. If we fail in this, we must fail everywhere and in everything” (Berkovits 1945: 63-64). Berkovits’s focus on “education of a Jewish character” was a theme that recurred throughout his writings and remarks on Jewish education. He elucidated this idea in *Towards Historic Judaism* (Berkovits 1943). There, he described the mission of the Jewish school, an institution that he saw as a key mechanism for Jewish character development:

The Jewish School means a unified Jewish education, i.e., education governed in all its aspects by Jewish spiritual values. Its object is to convey to the child a picture of the world around him as seen through the eyes of Judaism. It aims at creating a consistent picture of the whole, by the application of Jewish moral, social and religious standards to all the important manifestations of life. It provides the child with a standard by which to measure things and events; it teaches him the Jewish way of thinking. It imparts to the child a ‘*Weltanschauung*’ [world view] always bearing in mind the ultimate aim— the Jewish way of living (Berkovits 1943: 119).

A Jewish day school, in Berkovits’s view, could provide the type of educational integration that would enable students to bring Jewish perspective to bear on all aspects of life.

For Berkovits, Hebrew language is a *sine qua non* of Jewish culture and, hence, of Jewish education:

Without a knowledge of Hebrew we can give our children only a second or third-hand Judaism.... The language in which our prophets, thinkers, and teachers expressed themselves bears the stamp of their soul; only a thorough knowledge of their language allows one to participate in their innermost dreams, thoughts and feelings. For this reason the Jewish school must be to a considerable extent a Hebrew school (Berkovits 1943: 119).

Though, in the 1940’s, Berkovits could envision the possibility of the hebraization of Jewry beyond the land of Israel, the study and *discussion* of Hebrew texts, in Hebrew, in Jewish schools in the United States was a limited phenomenon during the first half of the twentieth century and has declined over the ensuing generations (Krasner 2011: 28-30, 99-102).

Beyond studying Bible and post-Biblical literature in Hebrew, Berkovits averred that Jewish education “demands the Jewish teaching of all the subjects of

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the curriculum” (Berkovits 1943: 120). Such disciplines as history, literature, economics and science must all be examined and understood through a Jewish lens. For example, “We want the discussion of social and economic problems to be carried on along the lines laid down for instance by Amos and Hosea and further developed by the masters of the Oral Law.” As for science, it “can lead man away from God, and show him the way to God. It can undermine the moral conscience of man, but it can also deepen it. It can produce the basically a-moral and completely mechanized ‘superman,’ and it can engender humility, awe and a sense of responsibility in man. All depends on the spirit in which it is approached” (Berkovits 1943: 121-122).

Prophetic ideals of right conduct—as articulated by such figures as Amos and Hosea—reflect the ethical expectations that are to inform Jewish practice. The prophets, however, lived over the span of a few centuries that ended two and one-half millennia ago. The enduring application of Torah to life is, for Berkovits, represented by the halakhic (Jewish legal) system. As he explains in *Not in Heaven*, “*Halakhah* is the bridge over which Torah moves from the written word into the living deed” (Berkovits 1983: 1). Inasmuch as “there is no such thing as life in general, since it is always a certain form of life at a specific situation, Torah application means application to a specific situation” (Berkovits 1983: 1-2). *Halakhah* is “the wisdom of the feasible, giving priority to the ethical” (Berkovits 1983: 117). The practice of *mitzvot*, in Berkovits’s view, connects the individual to God and nurtures ethical choices.

Jewish Education in the United States

Soon after moving to the United States, Berkovits addressed the challenge of Jewish education in the U.S., at mid-twentieth century. “One of the aims of the educational process must be to bring about a persistent and intimate confrontation between the American Jew and Judaism as a great historic civilization. But in order to achieve that one must go back to the sources” (Berkovits 1953a: 72). Appreciation of Judaism through a return to the sources would, Berkovits affirmed, create “the will to Judaism,” a desire for “Jewish living.”

Jewish day schools—educating nearly 185,000 students, four years of age through high school, by the end of the twentieth century (Schick 2000: 3)—were, at mid-century, in their early stages of growth; the Torah Umesorah (Orthodox) day school network, whose member schools accounted for the preponderance of day school enrolment, reported ninety-five schools with 14,000 students in 1946 (Wertheimer 1999: 18). Instruction often emphasized knowledge acquisition with less regard for

internalization of the lessons imparted. Berkovits defined the task of the Jewish school as nothing less than shaping the course of students' lives:

The task of a school, and especially of a Jewish School, is not to teach, but to educate; not just to impart knowledge, but to mould character and shape human personality. The teaching of subjects is not the goal but one of the means of education. The purpose of all education is to exercise influence upon the life-course of human beings far beyond the classroom, the school hours and the school years. All education must be education for life, or it does not deserve its name (Berkovits 1954: 24).

Berkovits's critique of post-World War II Jewish education as he encountered it in the United States, 1950-1975, was echoed by a keen observer and chronicler of that generation, Walter Ackerman. Reflecting on the state of Jewish education, Ackerman wrote:

Education, in its most fundamental sense... is the expression of a sensibility to a standard and represents the attempts of a society to mould the character of its members in accordance with an ideal[...]. I would suggest that Jewish education... has not been informed by such an ideal. One can argue with some cogency, I believe, that until such an ideal is articulated, efforts at the improvement of Jewish education will remain little more than patchwork mechanics which only fall short of any serious mark... (Ackerman 1975: 433-434).

Jewish education as character development—shaping attitude, worldview and behavior—was, for Berkovits, the ideal that should inform curriculum and instruction.

Writing at a time when self-directed “values clarification” was much in vogue, Berkovits affirmed that Jewish education is not only about maintaining Judaism but about “how to preserve life itself in dignity and meaningfulness” (Berkovits 1970a: 11). Quoting Heinrich Himmler's comments to SS leadership on having remained honest men while writing a “glorious page in history (murdering six million Jews),” Berkovits observes:

In a world in which there are no ‘Thou-shalts’ and no ‘Thou-shalts-nots’ that cannot be questioned, in which man is the creator of his values *ex-nihilo*, where all principles of morality are relative to the man and the society that creates them, it does make good sense to commit genocide and yet to consider oneself honest

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people. It is the ultimate logic of a relativistic ethics to which modern man has dedicated himself (Berkovits 1970a: 7).

An approach positing that there is no “right” set of values but, merely, a need to help students clarify their personal values is, accordingly, utterly alien to Berkovits’s worldview.

Education in a World Adrift

In addition to authoring numerous books and articles while serving as Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and faculty member at Hebrew Theological College, Berkovits spoke before a variety of audiences within and outside the College. His unpublished papers from that period include handwritten pages on matters of Jewish education that might have served as notes for classes or public lectures. Berkovits writes that education begins when a child is born: how parents treat one another; how they speak to the child; how they relate to other people: these are all aspects of education. Jewish education is not a subject: it is character building; education for a way of life (Berkovits 1960-1965c: 3).

Berkovits was especially critical of bar/bat mitzvah-focused Jewish education, labeling it “a farce.” Devoting inordinate amounts of time to preparing to chant some blessings or biblical passages—all too often, by way of one-time “performance”—was, in Berkovits’s view, scarcely character-building. He commented that “Whatever a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah has to ‘perform’ must be incidental to the educational process: it should result naturally from it; it should require hardly any special preparation” (Berkovits 1960-1965c: 5).

Despite his decidedly intellectual bent, Berkovits opined that, beyond cognitive understanding, it is essential that Jewish education nurture an emotional attachment to Judaism. Though knowledge is important, character development and embracing a way of life are not primarily matters of the intellect. “Commitment is the work of the heart, not of the mind,” he observed (Berkovits 1960-1965c: 6). Accordingly, “The Jewish educator dare not speak to the intellect of the student alone; he must address himself to the entire personality of the student...” (Berkovits 1960-1965b: 6).

In one of his unpublished papers, Berkovits defines what he terms the “philosophy of Jewish education” as “the meaningful articulation of the purpose of Jewish education as it applies to the contemporary situation of the Jew in its entirety.” Jewish education, he declares, is not merely about subject matter. “Only if we are able to teach Judaism in full awareness of the nature and the needs of the contemporary situation, if we can translate it into effective guidelines for human action and behavior (Jewish) in this

given, concrete situation, does our effort become education” (Berkovits 1960-1965a: 1-2). Jewish education is about the application of enduring values to real-life situations.

Berkovits comments that educators in the latter half of the twentieth century have little precedent for the current reality—a great deal of trial and error is needed; contemporary efforts are experimental. “The house of American Jewry (is) still being built....How to live authentically as Jews in this situation; how to relate Judaism to the contemporary situation (are) unanswered questions” (Berkovits 1960-1965a: 5). Berkovits decried as a frustrating anachronism the rejection of higher secular education by some Jewish pietists, including teachers. That the integration of religious studies and secular studies remained a contentious issue was embarrassing. To Berkovits, it was evident that “Israel, the people of the Torah, must acquire mastery in the realm of worldly knowledge and weave the pattern of unity between fact and value, faith and reality, between life and Torah” (Berkovits 1962: 16).

In an address delivered to the annual dinner of the Chicago Academy (day high school) Associates, *circa* 1970, Berkovits opened by referencing his book *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*. He commented that, a quarter of a century after publication of that work, the world remained between past and future. Reflecting on the alienation of contemporary youth from “establishment” society, he questioned whether young Jews had ever truly encountered or experienced Judaism:

It is just possible that our youth is too intelligent to be impressed by a Jewish education that is chiefly geared to a farcical bar mitzvah ceremony which is to culminate in the vulgarity of an ostentatious party, that adds meaninglessness to the farce. It is just possible that our youth is too honest to be impressed by the lip-service to a Synagogue—or Temple—Judaism that has no effects on the life that Jews lead outside the synagogue and the temple. It is just possible that the kind of superficial pale ghost of Judaism that the American Jew has tried to communicate to his children deserves to be rejected. The tragedy, of course, is that this youth identify the inadequacy and failings of their elders with Jewishness; that they believe that the spiritual vacuum in the midst of which they grew up is characteristic of Judaism itself, whereas in reality it is the extent of the alienation of their elders from authentic Judaism. In truth, they are alienated from the farce that was left after the alienation of the parent generation from the heart and soul of Judaism (Berkovits 1970b: 4-5).

Day school and yeshiva education were also not devoid of disappointing results. In part, suggested Berkovits, this was because “the heads and teachers in the *yeshivot* do not understand that we are in the ‘in between’ situation, that we live between

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yesterday and tomorrow, and that yesterday is no longer.” What is needed, he suggested, is “an educational philosophy and an interpretation of Judaism that will equip our youth with effective intellectual tools to meet the challenge of the present human situation in all its social, political, ethical, and spiritual manifestations—to meet it significantly and to meet it as Jews. Our philosophy of Jewish education ought to act as a ferment at the very center of American Jewry...” (Berkovits 1970b: 7).

Berkovits expanded on the importance and opportunity of Jewish education “in a world adrift,” in the pages of *Tradition*. The moral relativism that has replaced the collapse of the value system by which civilization earlier functioned has, Berkovits suggests, led to confusion, conflict and chaos. This disintegration and dissolution of value standards underscores the importance of Jewish education:

Jewish education must no longer remain a marginal affair, it must move to the center of our educational responsibility toward our children. It has to fill the vacuum of values and meaning; it has to provide guidance in a time of confusion; it has to teach a way in the midst of chaos. As far as our children are concerned, Jewish education has to provide for them the vision of the future, without which youth cannot prosper and mature... (Berkovits 1970a: 11).

The “Commonplaces” of Education in Berkovits’s Reflections

A contemporary of Berkovits, Joseph J. Schwab (1909-1988), was—during Berkovits’s years at Hebrew Theological College—publishing critical works on education as Professor at the University of Chicago. Reminiscent of Berkovits’s comments on the “farce” of bar/bat mitzvah preparation, Schwab complained that “surveys of knowledge, instillation of ‘principles’ extracted from their meaning-conferring structure, or intensive drills in ‘fundamental’ facts without the framework that confers significance on them” are a sterile experience lacking in educational purpose (Schwab 1969: 201). Schwab affirmed that “Defensible educational thought must take account of four commonplaces of equal rank: the learner, the teacher, the milieu and the subject matter” (Westbury and Wilkof 1978: 371). While there is no way of knowing with certainty that Berkovits read Schwab’s work, Berkovits’s approach to education clearly addresses these commonplaces.

For Berkovits, as for Schwab, it is vital that the learner’s educational experiences be life-connected. The learner’s reality is an essential starting point for meaningful educational engagement. Berkovits and Schwab would both have agreed with John Dewey’s observation that the presenting question is: “How shall the young become acquainted with

the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?" (Dewey 1997: 23). Both viewed emphasis on merely mastering information—a common focus of the time—as a flawed approach to education.

To be meaningful to the learner, education must relate to the milieu of which the learner is a part; hence, Berkovits's oft-repeated call to consider the "contemporary situation," recognizing that "yesterday is no longer." The subject, Judaism, encompasses, for Berkovits, the totality of life and represents the standard by which the student should learn to measure things and events. The classical sources of Judaism as well as the study of such disciplines as science, history, economics and literature should be approached in ways that inspire the learner to a life-course of Jewish action. By shaping habits and guiding its practitioner to right conduct, *halakhah* is educative; Jewish learning is not only about texts, but about behavior as well.

Writing in the 1970s, Berkovits pointed to the bifurcation of curriculum of Jewish day schools and *yeshivot* as a "serious shortcoming":

In our Day Schools and Yeshiva High Schools, the curriculum is divided into *limudei kodesh* and *limudei hol*, sacred studies, the teaching of Jewish subjects on the one hand, and secular studies of a general nature on the other. These two sections of the curriculum are kept strictly separated from each other, representing two worlds that do not recognize each other. But one cannot educate effectively in this manner. The two areas of knowledge cannot be kept apart in the mind and soul of the student (Berkovits 1976: 169).

The educator must be the embodiment of the integrated Jewish personality. For Berkovits, "the living example of the teacher (is) of the utmost importance—the teacher must live his teaching" (Berkovits 1960-1965b: 6). To reach and teach learners and to effectively connect the four "commonplaces," the education of teachers and rabbis needed to be re-imagined.

Educating Toward Tomorrow

In 1976, Berkovits moved to Israel. It was a transition that had been on his mind since, at least, 1948. Writing to Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, former Rector of the *Rabbinerseminar* in Berlin from which Berkovits was ordained, months after establishment of the Jewish state, he commented: "it is my desire to go to the land of Israel and find the possibility of working in research and (Jewish) science and to help with resolution of the many (halakhic) questions of the new state" (Berkovits 1948). Soon after relocating to the United States, he wrote his teacher: "the truth is that my heart is in the east (Israel) and it seems to me that the

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United States will just be another station before the goal which is the land of Israel” (Berkovits 1950).

For Berkovits, Judaism is a covenant between God and a people. Realization of the ideal social order that is integral to that relationship can best be achieved in a sovereign Jewish state, where the application of Torah extends to all spheres of life. Already, in 1943, Berkovits had sounded this theme: “Any further development of Judaism is only possible by the creation, somewhere on this earth, of a complete Jewish environment, i.e., a reality that is wide enough to embrace the whole existence of a Jewish national unit. Only by the creation of such a Jewish environment can we give back to Torah the great partnership of Life which alone is able to free Judaism from its present *Galut*-conditioned rigidity, and create the circumstances in which evolution will again be possible” (Berkovits 1943: 35).

Not surprisingly, after settling in Israel, Berkovits turned his attention to the challenge of Jewish education in Israeli society. Commenting on the two-track division between secular and religious studies prevalent in national religious education, Berkovits observed: “The students are educated in two worlds that don’t recognize one another. Such a path cannot succeed. It is doubtful whether this is education. Isn’t this closer to transmitting information about the various disciplines? We need a unified educational philosophy that enters instruction in all subjects into a Jewish worldview” (Berkovits 1987: 87). This was a theme that Berkovits had sounded over the course of four decades across the globe. He did not, however, develop an approach to its practical application to curriculum and instruction.

In his later years, Berkovits frequently visited the United States, often as a visiting scholar. On one such occasion, in 1985, he spoke at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in California. When asked what counsel he had to offer American Jewry, he advised Jewish learning. Observing that there is tremendous ignorance among American Jews, he pointed to Jewish learning as the essential road to understanding and actualizing the meaning of Judaism as a way of life. Jewish education, he affirmed, was essential to a vital Jewish present and future (Berkovits 1985). As he framed it in notes that he recorded a generation earlier, “an ignorant Judaism is not Judaism” (Berkovits 1960-1965d: 3).

Contemporary Trends in Jewish Education in the Light of Berkovits’s Reflections

Among contemporary trends in Jewish education, there are several that reflect Berkovits’s concerns. Berkovits’s view that Jewish education must embrace all disciplines of study led him to see Jewish day schools as particularly promising settings of Jewish education. Writing in 1970, he noted that five percent of Jewish

children attended day schools (Berkovits 1970b: 5). Day school enrolment more than doubled in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a direction that Berkovits would have found heartening (Graff 2008: 82-83, 103).

By the close of the twentieth century, interdisciplinary approaches were, in some day schools, gaining currency (Zeldin 1998; Malkus 2011). This trend has continued as more schools embrace project-based learning. That Jewish educators increasingly enjoy the benefit of teacher education—both “pre-” and “in-” service—and recognize their role in helping students build the world of tomorrow, rather than restoring the world of yesterday—would surely be encouraging from Berkovits’s perspective.

Mindful that Jewish education is both of the heart and of the mind Berkovits would affirm the view that “socio-emotional life is an essential part of Jewish identity and ought to be central to the articulated and pursued learning outcomes in Jewish education” (Noam and Kress 2018: 201). Current “re-imagining” of educational experiences surrounding bar and bat mitzvah in the direction of making this milestone more organic to an ongoing Jewish journey reflects Berkovits’s approach. Recognizing that Judaism is not just learned but lived, Berkovits might have found the turn to experiential Jewish education—often engaging families as well as children—a promising trend.

Synthesizing contemporary understanding of experiential education, David Bryfman defines this approach as “a philosophy and pedagogy that purposefully engages learners in direct experiences and focused reflection within settings inspired by Jewish values, traditions and texts in order to create knowledge, develop skills, clarify values and develop the individual capacities to contribute to their communities” (Bryfman 2014). Berkovits would surely have questioned the values clarification dimension of Bryfman’s definition, identifying with the observation of Shuki Taylor that “I find there to be an inherent conflict between the goals of Jewish education and the methodologies of experiential education. In attempting to accomplish both, the experiential Jewish educator needs to grapple—almost constantly—with how to serve as the facilitator of authentic learner-centered experience, while simultaneously directing toward goals and outcomes” (Taylor 2014: 43). Taylor’s comment describes the tension between what Michael Rosenak terms a “normative-ideational” educational approach and a “deliberative-inductive” orientation (Rosenak 1987: 15-26), a tension that Berkovits would have underscored, cautioning against relativism.

Seeing, as he did, Israel as “center stage” in the revitalization of Jewish life, Berkovits would applaud the educational partnerships launched in recent years, in which American and Israeli schools are “twinned” for purposes of nurturing a shared sense of peoplehood, though reminding us that *Judaism*, “a religion of the all-comprehensive deed,” stands at the core of that peoplehood (Berkovits 1966: 78).³ He would find indications of a distancing from Israel a matter of deep concern (Cohen and Kelman 2010; Wertheimer 2010). Recognizing

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that meaningful engagement must begin with the individual learner, Berkovits would likely be encouraged by Barry Chazan's description of Israel education, today, as "learner-centered in its focus on the individual; knowledge-centered in its diverse ways of knowing; and people-focused in its emphasis on experiencing Israel" (Chazan 2015: 89).

Berkovits would affirm the proposition that "Ideally, every American Jew would be proficient enough in textual Hebrew to engage with Biblical and rabbinic texts and proficient enough in modern Hebrew to read contemporary Israeli literature and debate political and philosophical issues in Hebrew with Israelis" (Benor 2018: 135). Conceding that the goal of Hebrew cannot be attained in a few instructional hours per week, he would urge intensified efforts at engaging learners in deeper participation in Jewish educational settings, rather than "settling" for what Benor terms "Hebrew infusion."⁴ He would welcome initiatives aimed at strengthening "first hand" access to Jewish literature through the development of enhanced Hebrew language proficiency.

Berkovits might be heartened by increasing "ferment" relating to Jewish education. As he observed when speaking of Jewish education in 1970, "in the realm of the spirit it is not numbers that count, but intensity of meaning and relevance of purpose" (Berkovits 1970b: 6). Before method and technique, Berkovits would argue for meaning and purpose as starting points in any consideration of education.

Given his attention to the purpose of Jewish education, Berkovits would no doubt look favorably on the prevailing notion that Jewish education must move beyond content and (mere) connection, and consider, rather, its impact on students' lives and behaviors (Ben-David 2015, Kress and Levisohn 2018). Among contemporary educators, backwards design—outcomes-focused learning experiences—increasingly guides curriculum decisions and instructional approaches. Concomitantly, recognition of the importance of "why?" and not only "how" and "what" has gained broader currency in Jewish educational discourse.⁵

Conclusion

Eliezer Berkovits did not leave a systematic guide to Jewish education. He did, however, consistently call attention to the need to focus on Jewish character-building through an integrated and comprehensive approach to education. The ultimate measure of the success of Jewish education is, for Berkovits, not simply knowledge acquisition, but impact on the life of the learner. Early in the 21st century, it is a measure that has been widely embraced.

Notes

¹ Shalom Carmy comments that “in the third quarter of the twentieth century, Eliezer Berkovits was one of the most articulate and wide-ranging stars in the firmament of modern Orthodox thought” (Carmy 2004: 192).

² For an outstanding introduction to and overview of themes addressed in the oeuvres of Eliezer Berkovits, see David Hazony’s introduction to *Eliezer Berkovits: Essential Essays on Judaism* (Hazony 2002: ix-xxxvi). A special issue of the Journal *Shofar* 31:4 (Summer 2013) includes six articles on diverse aspects of Berkovits’s thought. A recently-published essay examines Berkovits’s values-conscious approach to *halakhah* (Graff 2019).

³ The idea of *klal yisrael*, the community of Israel (the Jewish people) is, for Berkovits, integral to the ethos of Judaism. It is for that reason that he urged bold action to preserve the unity of the Jewish people by arriving at a collective approach to conversion—one recognizing the beliefs and concerns of diverse Jewish groups (Berkovits 1974: 468).

⁴ Recognizing that Hebrew proficiency cannot be achieved in a few instructional hours per week, Sarah Benor suggests concentrating on two more attainable goals: “competence in Jewish English and membership in a Hebrew-oriented metalinguistic community. In other words, a successful graduate of a program that adopts such goals would be able to comprehend and produce sentences in English laced with Hebrew words and would feel a strong personal connection to the Hebrew language and, through it, to Jews around the world” (Benor 2018: 127-128).

⁵ By the closing years of the twentieth century, such books as *Why Be Different?* (Prager and Lepoff 1986) and *Why Be Jewish?* (Wolpe 1995) focused on the fundamental question of Jewish meaning.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge with appreciation the generosity of Professor Avraham Berkovits, eldest son of Eliezer Berkovits, who graciously provided access to his father’s papers, in Israel. References to numbered documents are to papers in the Berkovits family’s collection. Box 25, from which several items are drawn, is labelled “lecture notes, 1960-1965.” I am indebted to Dr. Jacob J. Schacter of Yeshiva University, for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay and to Paul Miller, librarian at American Jewish University, for providing me a copy of the taped Berkovits lecture, referenced below.

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