Threefold Pluralism:
A Strategy for Building “Hybrid” School Community
by Michael A. Kay

The notion of creating a Jewish institution characterized by a commitment to ideological pluralism is not new. As long ago as 1934, Mordecai Kaplan envisioned a “community center” that would aim “to be affirmatively Jewish without committing itself to any specific type of Jewish religion.” He believed that an organization that would strive “to unite on an equal plane all types of Jews, Orthodox, Reformist, and Conservative, believers and non-believers, Zionists and non-Zionists, the recent immigrant as well as the Americanized Jew” would be able to offer “the best that can be obtained in education, music, art, and literature.” Kaplan expected that this trans-denominational approach to Jewish life and learning was to become the cornerstone of Jewish communal renewal in the years after the Great Depression.

The line between diversity and divisiveness can be a fine one, and most community schools have experienced circumstances in which the expression of opposing viewpoints has created potentially destructive tension.

While the widespread enactment of Kaplan’s vision was delayed perhaps longer than he had anticipated, the number of community-wide Jewish schools—particularly high schools—in North America has expanded rapidly over the past two decades. This proliferation has coincided with a reconceptualization of the notion of “community” in American education in general. As Gail Furman has written, the modern conception of community was quickly being replaced by what she called a postmodern one. Whereas communities had previously been based upon a “strong center of sameness” and aspirations of homogeneity, the new model is centered much more around the “inescapable awareness of others, of multiple cultures, of values and belief systems, and of interdependence with those who are different.” Members of a community could still share histories, customs, and values, but they had become more apt to celebrate the different ways in which they approached this common tradition.

Twenty-first century pluralistic Jewish schools face a perilous task: to craft school communities that are “hybrids,” at once modern and postmodern. Like Jewish institutions throughout history, they seek to emphasize a degree of homogeneity and sameness—the cultural, religious, and historical heritage that unites Jews across expanses of space and time. At the same time, they endeavor to honor the diversity that exists within this heritage and to promote the presentation of multiple perspectives as a foundation for learning. Leadership in pluralistic schools is fraught with complexity, as tensions between the “modern” and “postmodern” elements of the school mission can engender conflict, pedagogic difficulties, and seemingly unreasonable expectations for community engagement. Ideological pluralism in schools, however, presents not only challenges but also guiding strategies for overcoming these challenges. Leaders who develop a clear understanding of pluralism—particularly of the three different ways in which the concept may be defined and enacted—can succeed in navigating these tensions and crafting thriving hybrid communities.
Challenges of Hybrid Community Building

Any school community that seeks to recruit a student body representative of the ideological diversity of the Jewish community and to encourage vibrant discourse must first cultivate an environment that is viewed as welcoming and respectful toward multiple viewpoints.

In seeking to craft school communities that celebrate both commonality and diversity, leaders are liable to face numerous tensions and challenges. Primary among these is the propensity of such communities toward intra-organizational conflict. To be sure, organizations of all types—including the most homogeneous institutions—face conflict. Often, however, the organizational mission and philosophy are useful in helping leaders to arrive at answers. In the case of Jewish community schools, quite the opposite may be true: the nature of the trans-denominational mission and philosophy often makes mutually agreeable solutions even more elusive. The line between diversity and divisiveness can be a fine one, and most community schools have experienced circumstances in which the expression of opposing viewpoints—the very act that defines the school as a vibrant community institution—has created potentially destructive tension within the school community.

No school leader is a stranger to conflict; one study from the early 1990s indicated that school administrators spend approximately 40% of their time engaged in “conflict management.” Nevertheless, what makes conflict in pluralistic schools particularly threatening is that the issues that are likely to be the subject of the most vigorous debate within such schools constitute the very essence of what the school is all about: What are our central educational goals? What should we teach, and using what methodologies? Who should teach in our school, and how should those teachers be trained? How should Jewish ritual be observed? What religious principles, if any, should we take into account when devising school policies? As we define the “community” for the purposes of our Jewish community school, who is in and who is out—where do the boundaries lie? For a school that is both modern and postmodern, that seeks to honor both a shared heritage and a diversity of approaches to this heritage, each of these questions has the potential to present a significant obstacle to the process of community building.

A second source of tension that challenges school leaders is the complexity associated with instruction in a community school. As the expanded notion of community gains traction within the Jewish world, it is now simply expected that a teacher will master several different perspectives on a particular issue, understand each perspective well enough to answer questions about it, and present all of the perspectives fairly without giving preference to any one. And while it may be easy for school leaders to articulate such a vision for pedagogy in their school, implementation frequently proves difficult. In many schools, students and parents find that the pedagogic methods in which Judaic Studies teachers were trained, often in movement-based training institutions, differ from those preached by the administration as ideal for a community school, or that the student experience varies considerably from classroom to classroom. The effort to enact such a vision of instruction often constitutes another major challenge within our schools.

A Jewish day school’s mission of identity-building can be a third source of complication in a community school. The notion of bringing together individuals representing a diversity of perspectives and promoting thoughtful interaction among them works well when the participants already possess clear understandings of their own beliefs and practices. But what about day school students who are only just beginning to develop their own Jewish identities? Can a school foster substantive interaction among diverse identities while at the same time working to develop these identities, in many cases from scratch? When students, many of whom attend denominational synagogues or have had a particular set of traditions instilled in them by
When students are presented in school with a variety of alternative viewpoints that are equally compelling, do schools risk replacing robust, individual identity with a diluted sense of Jewish universalism?

A final challenge that community school leaders are likely to face is a lack of ideological diversity or ideological passion within their school communities. For one thing, many of our community schools simply do not boast sufficient breadth to consider themselves truly representative of the Jewish community at large. Furman’s vision of postmodern community functions most effectively when the diverse perspectives that are expressed represent the genuine views of the people expressing them. It is possible for a classroom teacher to inject into a discussion approaches that are not represented by students within the class, but this is seldom an adequate substitute for vibrant debate among people whose outlooks legitimately differ from one another. Second, construction of a community that values diverse perspectives requires that participants demonstrate characteristics that do not come naturally to many people—especially to children and teenagers. These traits include ideological passion and an eagerness to engage in principled discussion on issues of religious belief and practice. If a student chooses not to take part in conversations on these topics, or does not demonstrate sufficient interest to sustain spirited, thought-provoking debate, then that student’s views will not be represented. It is difficult for a community to understand and celebrate diverse viewpoints if these viewpoints are not expressed with clarity and fervor by the members of the community.

Defining Pluralism

There are no universal solutions to these challenges, and the most effective strategies will vary significantly from community to community. Nonetheless, our field has often identified “pluralism” as a guiding philosophy that can help us craft communities honoring both commonality and diversity. The trouble with pluralism, however, is that we have never quite been able to define what the term means. As Susan Shevitz has pointed out, the word has generally been regarded as nebulous, with each practitioner and scholar in the field devising her/his own meaning, and many people simply refraining from using the word for fear of being misunderstood. I suggest that some of this confusion derives from the fact that pluralism is not a unitary concept. There are three different, yet related, phenomena that all are known by the name “pluralism,” and a school that seeks to implement all three is likely to have the most success in building a strong, vibrant, “hybrid” community. These three phenomena may be called atmospheric pluralism, informational pluralism, and interactional pluralism.

Atmospheric pluralism

Atmospheric pluralism refers to the cultivation of an environment in a school in which individuals who represent diverse approaches to Jewish belief and practice may coexist comfortably. Stakeholders of an institution that is atmospherically pluralistic celebrate the ideological diversity that exists within their community, and they strive to create an atmosphere that is perceived to be welcoming, open, and tolerant. In order to achieve atmospheric pluralism, members of a school community need not necessarily interact extensively with one another, achieve deep understanding of one another’s perspectives, or adopt an open stance.
toward mutual influence. They must simply recognize their diversity and construct an atmosphere in which this diversity is respected and honored.

Many community schools have prioritized atmospheric pluralism (without naming it as such), and it is generally easy to identify manifestations of this concept. An atmospherically pluralistic school might display books, artwork, or other prominent objects that are representative of numerous ideological perspectives—I was once in a classroom, for example, that featured a bookshelf with 
siddurim
 from four different denominations and a copy of the ArtScroll
Tanakh
 sitting alongside Richard Elliott Friedman’s
Who Wrote the Bible?.
Such a school's ritual programming could include multiple
minyanim
 or other approaches that allow each individual to practice Judaism in the manner that is most comfortable for her/him. Some schools also craft policies that encourage diverse expressions of Judaism through dress, such as by encouraging the wearing of
kippot
 or
tzitzit
 without mandating it. While atmospheric pluralism is the most passive form of pluralism, it is often the most noticeable. Decisions that leaders make about school atmosphere can be fraught with symbolism, and these decisions play a major role in crafting a community that is genuinely perceived as honoring multiple approaches.

Informational pluralism

Informational pluralism seeks to go beyond the creation of a comfortable atmosphere by actively promoting understanding of diverse religious ideologies. This form of pluralism requires the transmission of knowledge pertaining to diverse approaches to Judaism. Not only must stakeholders be welcoming and respectful toward people with a variety of views (as in atmospheric pluralism), but they must also learn about and demonstrate understanding of these views. Participants are expected to develop familiarity with the beliefs and practices of those whose approaches are different from their own, even if they need not necessarily interact extensively with such people.

Within a school context, informational pluralism is most likely to manifest itself in the curriculum. Teachers must be prepared to expose their students to a variety of perspectives on central questions of Jewish belief and practice without espousing any particular approach as ideal or prescriptive. Through the activities that take place inside the classroom, students are given the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the diversity that defines the modern Jewish world. A student should not be trained to view every individual approach as equally valid—indeed, such an approach would undermine the development of individual religious identity—but he/she should be expected to give due consideration to alternative viewpoints and to articulate thoughtfully why her/his personal perspective is right for her/him. As Rabbi Daniel Lehmann has written, a primary goal of pluralism is to “shape a generation of Jews who understand the particularity of their own commitments in the context of the broader Jewish community.”

The classroom is not the only domain of informational pluralism. If we want our students truly to demonstrate deep understanding of multiple approaches, and also to be prepared to make well informed, autonomous choices about their personal systems of religious belief and practice as they prepare for adulthood, then we must expand our methodologies of Jewish education into the realm of the experiential. A student will not achieve the comprehension and connection that we desire simply through listening to explanations of—or even reading texts about—different religious philosophies or ritual practices. As we prepare students to comprehend a variety of practices and make thoughtful decisions about their own lives, we should emphasize the types of experience-based educational opportunities that many pluralistic schools now offer: have students hear multiple liturgies and melodies in their prayer services, watch as both a live chicken and a sack of money are lifted over head for the
kapparot
 ritual before Yom Kippur, or stage mock Jewish weddings in accordance with diverse modern nuptial traditions. The
experience of these observances—and the reflective discussions/debates that follow—can be moments of genuine informational pluralism, exposing students to different approaches that communities have taken and the multiple belief systems that underlie these approaches.

**Interactional pluralism**

Interactional pluralism is the most dynamic form of pluralism, and—when implemented thoughtfully—it can be the most effective guide for overcoming the challenges outlined above. This form of pluralism requires that community stakeholders actively engage with one another and open themselves to the possibility that their own views may be influenced through exposure to the approaches of others. Beyond simply respecting and tolerating—or even just learning about—one another, participants in this model of pluralism take an active role in articulating their own views, listening thoughtfully to alternative perspectives, and making informed decisions about possible modifications to their systems of belief and practice. In a school that is interactionally pluralistic, individuals (or groups) representing diverse ideological viewpoints participate in dialogue, think carefully about how these interactions might enrich their own views, and yet remain confident enough in their individual identities to resist the forces of assimilation or homogenization.

Interactional pluralism takes a number of forms in community schools. Inside classrooms, teachers use vibrant discussion as a pedagogic tool, encouraging students to articulate their own viewpoints and to debate respectfully with their classmates. Outside the classroom, experiential educators may expect students to declare openly their own ritual preferences as they collaboratively craft a communal Shabbaton or holiday experience. In open forums or *beit midrash* sessions, members of the school community are given the opportunity to voice their beliefs and hear from their classmates and colleagues on challenging questions of religious practice within the school. And on the level of professional and lay leadership, interactional pluralism may be enacted through deliberations about dietary practices, admissions policies (who is considered “Jewish” for the purposes of attending our school?), faculty hiring, and educational goals. In each of these cases, the pluralism that is enacted in the school goes beyond an effort to enable Jews of diverse views and backgrounds to feel comfortable and respected, and beyond even learning to understand one another’s views. Rather, it creates opportunities for school stakeholders to engage directly with colleagues whose opinions may differ markedly from their own, and it expects them to adopt a stance of openness toward learning from one another as they strive to construct a “hybrid” community that celebrates both commonality and diversity.

**Threefold Pluralism as a Guiding Strategy**

By striving for enactment of these three forms of pluralism, schools leaders can take important steps toward navigating the challenges associated with building hybrid communities. Atmospheric pluralism, for example, is a crucial prerequisite for addressing several of the tensions discussed above. Any school community that seeks to recruit a student body that is representative of the ideological diversity of the Jewish community at large and to encourage vibrant ideological discourse must first cultivate an environment that is viewed as welcoming and respectful toward multiple viewpoints. And in the realm of conflict, it is important to note that the most effective way of addressing this source of tension is not through the suppression or avoidance of discord, but rather through the recognition of the existence of diverse opinions, respect for an individual’s right to express her/his opinion, and careful management of a process by which these opinions can be voiced. As Albert O. Hirschman noted in his book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), an atmosphere comfortable for those who wish to voice dissent is a crucial feature of a healthy organization.6 An individual who feels that such an atmosphere does not exist is liable to respond by simply withdrawing from the organization, which would be crippling
for a school that seeks diverse perspectives as a component of its raison d'etre. As such, the pursuit of atmospheric pluralism provides an important guideline for school leaders who seek to craft communities that value multiple approaches to a shared heritage.

Like atmospheric pluralism, informational pluralism can be invoked as a guiding principle for addressing the tensions that confound community school leaders. As noted above, the complexity of instruction in community schools is among the most acute challenges faced by our schools. It is also the area, though, in which targeted professional development can be most effective. It is often easier to train teachers to understand and present a broad range of information than to create a comfortable atmosphere or to cultivate fruitful interactions. Additionally, this need is likely to be consistent across schools: the nature of particular ideological conflicts or the degree of ideological passion may vary considerably from community to community, but almost all schools could benefit from training programs that help teachers feel confident in their own understandings of diverse approaches to Judaism and comfortable exposing students to these approaches—through traditional means and experientially—without prejudice. Training in informational pluralism thus constitutes an excellent opportunity for coalitions of school to pool their intellectual and financial resources as they seek to improve instruction and reduce difficulty for teachers.

A careful approach to interactional pluralism can also be an important strategy for navigating the tensions of community building. For one thing, it can help a school to overcome the challenge of ideological apathy: studies have shown that the internal struggle among competing ideas is a critical stimulus of identity development, and that individuals who are forced to articulate and defend their views within the context of a well managed disagreement tend to deepen their understanding of their own perspectives and acquire superior ability to employ critical thinking, debate, and higher-level reasoning strategies. As Susan Tanchel wrote based upon her own experiences working in a pluralistic Jewish high school, “By listening to and challenging one another, students become more aware of their own assumptions and beliefs, and begin to realize in what ways their existing beliefs are satisfying, and in what ways they are not.”

Interactional pluralism can also be valuable in addressing challenges outside the classroom. In the realm of conflict, for example, the insistence that participants remain open to being influenced by the viewpoints of others provides a guideline for managing discord productively. If school stakeholders come to see ideological disagreement as a fruitful element of organizational pluralism rather than as a zero-sum battle that produces winners and losers, then the school may begin to reap some of the benefits that can accrue to dynamic, diverse institutions. As scholars have noted, these benefits include the forging of group consciousness and relationships, as well as establishing an environment that enables organizational change while avoiding the stagnation that can be associated with ideological uniformity. Providing a forum for conflict within a framework of interactional pluralism also vests individuals representing diverse Judaic viewpoints with the authority to play influential roles within the school community, limiting the perceived dominance of any single perspective. The mandate to take into account multiple perspectives ensures that numerous stakeholders will be given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Distributed leadership is thus another important benefit that is likely to manifest itself in a school that filters its conflicts through the lens of interactional pluralism.

To be sure, pluralism is a guiding philosophy, not a predictor of specific outcomes, and it does not offer formulaic solutions to the problems of community building. Thus, even if two schools profess to have similar theoretical philosophies of pluralism, the specific manifestations of this philosophy are likely to vary considerably between the schools, and the schools’ strategies for...
navigating the challenges outlined above may vary as well. It is impossible to answer such general questions as “How does a pluralistic Jewish school curriculum address the issue of Biblical authorship?” or “Must a male student cover his head in a pluralistic Jewish school?” A pluralistic school leader must be sensitive to the school’s demographics, history, and surrounding community as he/she seeks to enact the three forms of pluralism and set up processes to address questions such as these. If he/she thoughtfully takes these factors into account, however, then threefold pluralism can serve as an invaluable guide for crafting solutions that are uniquely suited to her/his particular school community.

Conclusion

There are many challenges that plague Jewish community school leaders as they seek to craft communities that are, in Gail Furman’s words, both “modern” (adhering to a shared history and tradition) and “postmodern” (celebrating the diversity of ways in which this common heritage may be approached). Community schools face conflict, pedagogic difficulties, a complex identity-building mission, and often a lack of ideological diversity and/or passion. Among the field’s most vexing challenges, though, has been our inability to agree upon a definition of pluralism—the very philosophy that school leaders have sought to employ to guide them through these other tensions. I propose that the term in fact is used to refer to three distinct, yet related, phenomena: atmospheric pluralism, informational pluralism, and interactional pluralism. By seeking to enact all three of these forms of pluralism in our schools, we can take steps toward transforming the challenges outlined above into opportunities that will reap significant benefits for our school communities. Conflict can become an enlightening process of identity formation and leadership distribution, and a homogenous, apathetic student body can discover the benefits of its ideological diversity through proficiency in critical thinking and debate.

Pluralistic community schools constitute the only sector of non-Orthodox Jewish day school education that is experiencing growth, and thus the demand for comprehensive knowledge that can foster success in these schools is expanding rapidly. Fortunately, the level of enthusiasm in the field to persevere in the face of the evident challenges, to seek the benefits to individual and community that the enterprise of pluralism promises, and to continue to develop theoretical and practical approaches to enacting pluralism appears high. As Michael Gillis wrote in his analysis of the challenges of pluralism, “Those whose commitment to Jewish peoplehood prevents them from simply throwing in the towel will continue to wrestle with the problems rather than gleefully retreating into self-righteous isolation.”

Those of us who have embraced this wrestling match are now able to undertake systematic analysis of the tensions that community school leaders must navigate and the forms of pluralism that provide strategies for navigating these tensions. Equipped with the lessons that are to be learned from this analysis, North American Jewry may be empowered to move one step closer to the idealized vision of pluralistic communal life that Mordecai Kaplan articulated 75 years ago.

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