''Dis-Assimilation': Reclaiming of Jewish Identity in Europe - The Experience of Paideia

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A dramatic reclaiming of Jewish identity is currently taking place in Europe, a phenomenon that could be termed 'dis-assimilation'. The present article will claim that what is taking place, and the resulting response in Jewish education has importance not only for Jewish life in Europe, but also has far reaching implications for education in the rest of the Jewish world.

Properly, a profile of contemporary Europe and Jewish life should commence with the caveat that the concept ‘Europe’ is a construct, a geographical notion that, given the variety of cultures, languages, and histories, encompasses a great number of divergent realities. Together with that, however, the emergence of the European Union has done much to give substance to the notion of a unified entity. Sweeping developments, including the fall of the Berlin wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the formation of a single European market, and the opening of borders of previously intact nation-states, have affected all citizens of Europe, and Jews among them. In no small sense the identity patterns included in this transformation constitutes an exact turn-about of what was understood in the previous Europe: a change from nation-

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states, based upon commonality of identity where the Jew was suspect of dual loyalties, transposed into liberal democracies based upon the right to be different, where the Jew is the paradigm of hyphenated identities.¹

This transformation has had a profound impact on Jewish life and partially explains a phenomenon that has transpired in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism: a reoccurring narrative of recovered identities. The stories are rampant, and the pattern reiterates itself: in Central Europe a grandparent reveals that he or she is Jewish, a fact that has sometimes been unknown even to the rest of the nuclear family for all of the grandparent’s life. His or her Jewish identity had understandably been repressed as a result of the trauma of the Holocaust and further suppressed during the Communist regime. (In Eastern Europe the stories vary somewhat: often there was an awareness of Jewish identity because it was stamped into the personal papers, but the term 'Jewish' was vacuous, and often onerous.) A significant number of the generation of grandchildren who undergo this moment of disclosure regarding their Jewish ancestry subsequently have chosen to identify as Jews².

¹ As Jonathan Cohen states: “While nineteenth and twentieth century Jews understood (rightly or otherwise) that the price of admission into the ‘established’ societies and cultures of Europe amounted to at least a partial repression of their Jewish identity, today’s multiculturalism has rendered calls for conformity unfashionable, impractical, and politically incorrect….. Once again, the Jews of Europe must exert themselves to determine precisely where they stand within the larger non-Jewish world around them.” Jonathan Cohen, *Rethinking European Jewish History*, Jeremy Cohen & Moshe Rosman, eds., The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London, 2009, p. 5

² I am unaware of any comprehensive studies that have been conducted with regard to the statistical numbers involved in this phenomenon. Obviously absolute numbers might well be moot since, by definition, those who do not acknowledge their identity might never reveal themselves to the researcher. A number that might be of interest to future researchers is one that was related to me orally by Professor Michael Birenbaum, the Holocaust scholar, who estimates that perhaps
This story of recovered identities, although acknowledged as occurring in other locations, warrants specific reflection in Europe. Perhaps, as indicated above, even a new term should be suggested, since its implications for Jewish life and Jewish education are manifold; the term I would suggest is 'dis-assimilation', for the persons involved are those who have truly reversed the processes of assimilation. A number of defining factors in Europe indicate this reversal: first and foremost there apparently is no currency of social profit for these re-claimants, in that they know full well what non-Jews feel about Jews (as opposed to the forces of assimilation that act as a pressure for shedding the burden of being different). Secondly, there is no social coercion, since previously no one had known them as Jewish, thus nullifying, in these cases, the claim of Jean-Paul Sartre that it is the non-Jew who makes a person a Jew. Thirdly, the people who make this decision have no childhood memories of being Jewish, and no childhood Jewish education.

It might appear that the last factor, the lack of any childhood Jewish

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20,000 Jewish babies were born in Poland between 1942-1945 and who were secretly given to Central European families. What percentage of these babies, now the age of grandparents, were told of their origins, or how many of those who were told subsequently revealed their identities to a member of their families is unknown. What is apparent is the significant number of grandchildren who choose to identify as Jews, as reflected in large numbers of applicants to Paideia from Central Europe with this reiterative narrative.

3 As anecdotally recorded in Barbara Kessler’s Suddenly Jewish: Jews raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots (Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Mass., 2000)

4 This is under the presumption, well circulated in Jewish spheres, that the general population in central Europe is anti-Semitic.

5 They negate what Sartre claims is the essence of Jewish identity: “It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews.” Jean Paul Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew. Schocken, 1965, p.67.
education, establishes a deficit that is almost insurmountable. However, I would like to make the rather radical claim that, in my experience, this very point provides an educational opportunity that is both intriguing and tantalizing in its implications for Jewish education: given the lack of a childish rendition, Jewish life and thought can be presented on a high intellectual level for people who have chosen to identify themselves as Jews. It can be truly ‘adult’ – not just because the participants are adult, but because the educator needs not yield to childhood impressions, of which there are none in their cases. And, further – the education is not unidirectional, from the Jewish educator to the educational recipient, for these ‘dis-assimilators’ can function as informants regarding what they see as giving substance and grounding to their choice. The educator can become truly educated in what these dis-assimilators find so compelling that they choose to identify as Jews.

My observations are based upon the educational experience of the past nine years of founding and directing Paideia, the European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden. Paideia is the only pan-European institute of Jewish studies with a one-year program dedicated solely to Jewish studies. It was formulated specifically with these ‘dis-assimilators in mind, although persons that fit this profile are not the only participants. It brings 25 post-graduate fellows, average age 29, to Stockholm for a full year of academic study based upon intensive encounter with Jewish text. The majority of these fellows come from Central and Eastern Europe, although the spread is wide – by the end of 2011 the institute will have graduated 225 fellows from 34 European countries. The curriculum is built upon 14 semester-equivalent courses (taught in 2 week concentrated blocs, in addition to two year-long courses in Talmud and hermeneutics) with the objective of granting literacy in Jewish sources and empowering Jewish activism. All of the faculty come from Israel universities – an element that will be commented upon below. Many of the claims of this
article are based upon the experience of directing this institute, now in its ten year. Although the actual number of graduates is 200, nevertheless interviewing and processing applicants has involved well over 1000 persons.

The mandate that the institute declared to the Swedish government when it was founded⁶, was that it would serve as an educational instrument for the reclaiming of Jewish culture and life in Europe. With that presumptuous objective in mind, the questions regarding the target audience, framework, and most importantly, the curriculum were manifold and daunting.

The image of the ‘dis-assimilator’, as related above, stood at the center of the conception of the institute, and this imagined entity became the target audience. What could not have been anticipated was how well based in reality this phenomenon was. The plethora of stories that surfaced through interviewing Paideia applicants affirmed the assumption that dis-assimilation was indeed a phenomenon taking place all over Europe, but most particularly in Central Europe. Some applicants related events of Jewish discovery that were almost completely tangential: one related how her mother went to a dentist’s office, where the assistant asked whether she was aware that a Jewish community-center was opening in their city. Her mother was astounded that the assistant had assumed that she was Jewish, and upon denying that that was the case, asked why the assistant had made that conjecture. The assistant replied that the mother’s

⁶ A major founding grant was given by the Swedish government to establish the institute in 2000, and it became operative in September, 2001. The grant was the consequence of a commission of inquiry that the Swedish government established to investigate its role in the Holocaust, and which determined that although there was no legal culpability, nevertheless there was a sense of moral responsibility that resulted in three major steps: the convening of the Stockholm Forum in February 2000, the establishment of “Levande Historia” for education towards tolerance, and a grant towards the founding of Paideia.
last name was Jewish. Only upon returning home, and by reconstructing the gaps in her father-in-law’s life did that assumption become plausible. Indeed the family, out of curiosity, went to the newly formed community, resulting in their affiliation and ultimately conversion to Judaism. Other stories were more psychologically complex: a Hungarian high school student, in the heat of a competitive ball game, shouted out at one of the players on the opposing team: 'Dirty Jew!' He was subsequently chastised by his coach, and when the parents heard of the incident they too chastised him, concluding with the fact that not only was it improper to call someone a ‘Dirty Jew’, but that indeed the boy himself was Jewish.

These dis-assimilators represent an emerging new identity profile. As a group they are well-educated, often speaking multiple languages and knowledgeable of the literatures of those languages. They are anxious to engage as adults in serious Jewish education, are creative in cultural spheres, and frequently play key roles in Jewish life in areas where the remnant of the Jewish community was decimated by the Holocaust and the Soviet repression of identities.

The decision regarding the curriculum at Paideia was critical and perplexing: what could serve as the basis for the rather bombastic vision that had been formulated for the Swedish government – to create an institute that would act as an instrument in the regeneration of European Jewish culture? It would appear that this mandate would necessitate a determination of one of the most controversial issues in the Jewish world: a definition of Judaism. What lies at the heart of Jewish civilization? To employ traditional categories - is it the Jewish people ('Am Yisrael'), Jewish practice and Halachah ('Torat Yisrael'), Jewish nationhood ('Eretz Yisrael')? A determination in any of these directions would obviously eliminate participation on the part of some sectors of European Jewry.

The question, once alternatively formulated, became more promising: What could give the participants the tools by which they
themselves would be enabled to regenerate Jewish culture and make their own determinations regarding the nature of Jewish civilization? What could possibly empower them such that they themselves could become entrepreneurs of Jewish culture, and thus ultimately make their own verdicts concerning the definition of Jewish life? Is there any common and uniting aspect of Jewish life that could serve as the base curriculum that would not eliminate any of the possible future directions that the participants themselves might possibly make?

Inspiration was drawn from Moshe Halbertal7 in his book People of the Book: 'Rather than searching for the essence of Judaism in shared beliefs and practices that remain constant though they take superficially diverse form, I have chosen to focus on the shared commitment to certain texts and their role in shaping many aspects of Jewish life and endowing the tradition with coherence.'8 Based upon Halbertal’s claim that one of the major uniting features of Jewish life has been text and a text-centered community, it was determined that the first basic element of the curriculum would be literacy of the texts and sources that have been at the center of Jewish life. Thus the program of study was laid out in way in which a participant would significantly encounter the major works of the Jewish bookshelf (800 class hours). This also determined the minimal length of the program, since anything less than one year could not adequately address this central feature of the course of study. (Since the program was formulated with post-graduate activists in mind, it was also determined that the program – in that it is not degree granting – could not be much longer than a year.)

7 Professor Moshe Halbertal serves as the Chairman of the Academic Committee of Paideia.

The response of the first year participants (2001–2002) to this feature of the curriculum was awaited with baited breath. I often found myself standing in the corridor outside the lecture room, out of sight, listening and trying to judge the reactions of that first cohort of fellows who had come for the one-year course. Their reaction to text as curriculum was epitomized by one participant, Sorana, a fellow from Romania, who one day burst into my office exclaiming: 'I feel like I have found my native language!'

Subsequent years have shown that Sorana’s words regarding language were neither casual nor trivial, for within the European context the link between culture, language, and literature is inextricable. For example, many students in university major in 'Philology', meaning the literature and language of their culture. In acquiring a culture, it is well understood that one must become fluent in the literary sources of the culture. Thus, the choice of text and literature as curriculum resonates well with the European understanding of what it is to gain competence and a sense of authenticity in a culture.

The equivalency between language, culture, and literature also served as a rationale for naming the new institute 'Paideia'. As Elias Bickerman claimed in his seminal work of Hellenistic culture, the concept of Paideia, which was brought from Greece to the Ancient Middle East by Alexander and his conquering army, was a revolutionary one, for it meant that one could acquire a culture through the study of its texts (in the Greek case, this meant mastering Homer). Previously this possibility had been unknown in the ancient world – one was born into one’s identity. According to Bickerman, in the second century B.C.E. this model of Paideia was appropriated by Ben Sira who influenced the formation of the first academies of adult Jewish learning – the 'Beit Midrash'. Until
then, learning was an activity only for priests and jurists, who needed learning in order to perform rituals and judge disputes, and for children -’v’šinantem l’vanecha.’ Since the contemporary institute would be based upon a serious encounter with text (the equivalent of 14 semester courses) as a way of espousing Jewish culture, it was envisioned that through this literature one could also appropriate Jewish identity.

The second feature of the curriculum would be to empower the legitimacy of the interpretation of sources and texts. These two elements, text-centeredness and interpretation, became the signature of the curriculum, whose objective was to create, in a contemporary European context, a text-centered interpretive community. The weight of establishing this second feature, interpretation, was to rest upon two elements. First, to employ the traditional methodology of text-study, chevruta, whereby a text was to be explored and discussed in study-pairs prior to the lecture of the faculty-member, allowing for an empowerment of the interpretation of the student-pairs. Second, there was an attempt to infuse the curriculum with the interpretive urge by encouraging the participation of artists and creative personae, and to assign to each fellow the responsibility of formulating a project that each would develop upon graduation.

Chevruta became a signature of the studies at Paideia, and took on new meaning in the European context. In the context of a pan-European institute, with participants from so many different cultures (thus far participants have come from 32 European countries, and in any given year there are 12 – 15 languages spoken), sitting with a chevruta

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10 Halbertal, “Jewish culture evolved through the interpretation of the canon.” Ibid, p.7
partner was often an act of radical discrepancy. And therein lay the surprise. As the year progressed what was uncovered was that, given the equivalency described above between culture, language, and literature, the ‘difference’ from one’s study partner was transposed into a plethora of literary references from a variety of languages. The outcome was that the more one differed from one’s chevruta partner, the richer the text became. The chevruta experience was transformed into a paradigmatic example of the positive value of difference. An interesting dynamic was thus established: the text became the commonality between the group, and yet richness of the text was a function of the differences within the group. The process became a strong experience of group cohesion through difference.

As for the use of the arts to revitalize the interpretive process\(^\text{11}\), this was done on a variety of levels: the invitation to a number of faculty who were also artists who could invigorate sessions with a wide array of interpretation; the exposure to creative efforts in a format called 'Month of the Arts' in which artists from all over Europe and Israel were invited to perform; the inclusion of an arts track to attract arts as fellows.

Among the Paideia participants (200 graduates from 32 countries), establishing a text-centered interpretive curriculum has received a resounding ratification. Testimony upon testimony are recorded at Paideia that validate the desire and need for the study of text on a high intellectual level, as in academic studies in universities, but, unlike universities, the desire is that the textual studies not be detached from the living entity of Judaism.

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\(^{11}\) Kreitzer among others has written on the use of the arts to inject the student into the hermeneutical flow. See: L.J. Kreitzer, *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1994.
The demand upon the students to think innovatively regarding their home communities has given rise to a program called 'The Project Incubator' which is an intensive two week summer program for European innovators.

In closing, one of the multiple issues that the emergence of an institute such as Paideia arouses is the relationship with Israel. The attitudes towards Israel among European Jews are complex: on the one hand, undoubtedly, the existence of the State makes possible their living in Europe, for without it horrific memories would be too haunting; many if not most have family in Israel; the proximity makes travel to Israel entirely feasible and comfortable. On the other hand, European Jews in some countries are called upon to defend Israel in politically hostile situations. In a Pew Global Attitudes survey published in 2006, it was shown that far more Europeans sympathized with the Palestinians than with Israel. Undoubtedly the New European Jews are living and functioning in political and social climates that are much more nuanced and much more compromised than Jews in other Diaspora communities.

At the time of the creation of Paideia, the operative question was: on what basis should ties be forged between Israel and emerging Jewish life in Europe? It was determined to forge strong academic and intellectual ties by inviting Israeli faculty to teach the intensive textual courses, a policy that has continued until the present day. The rationale behind this policy was that the relationship with Israeli scholars in the field of Jewish textual studies would forge an academic, intellectual, and non-political bond between the emerging European leadership and the Jewish state. The Israel connection is further reinforced by a two to three week educational trip to Israel at the end of the first semester.

12 To Israel with Hate and Guilt” The Economist, August 17, 2006
In sum, Jewish education in Europe must respond to the challenges presented by new societal opportunities for Jews, to literate and cultured young adults who are choosing to recover Jewish life, to new patterns of identity, and to complex relationships with Israel. Certain paths seem particularly promising, among them the use of Jewish text understood as literature as the basis of a European cultural identity. The yet undetermined future of Jewish culture in Europe awaits substantive educational nourishment, for which Paideia is proud to play a part.