

Challenges of Educating for Covenantal Leadership

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In a very recent publication of the Leadership Commons of the Davidson School, I raised the question: *"So, as Jews and Americans, inheritors of an ancient tradition and the modern enlightenment, what is the end toward which we lead?"* I answered that question by offering Buber's vision of community, which in the tradition of Judaism is called Covenantal Community.

"For who in all these massed, mingled, marching collectivities still perceives what that is for which he supposes he is striving - what community is? They have all surrendered to its counterpart. Collectivity is not a binding but a bundling together: individuals packed together, armed and equipped in common, with only as much life from man to man as will inflame the marching step. But community, growing community (which is all we have known so far) is the being no longer side by side but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it also moves toward one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, a flowing from I to Thou."

To further elucidate, I offered the following: *"In [covenantal] community, we voluntarily come together to be present to one another and to care for one another. Through community, we seek for transcendent meaning and purpose in our lives, that what we do matters beyond us and will outlast us. And, thus we work to heal the world in which our community lives, though not in ways that sacrifice community. For, as Buber also says, the goal of community is community."*

In my experience, we (in the Jewish education world) have spent many decades training people for leadership positions in schools, camps, congregations, JCCs, federations and start-ups. We have brought to this work insights and practices from the contemporary, secular worlds of business and education, as well as from our own Jewish textual tradition. We can even see a shift toward embracing particular ways of leading such as distributive leadership and adaptive leadership, which I believe are supportive of leading toward covenantal community. Yet, in most leadership development programs, we teach the emerging leaders how to develop and articulate their own vision toward which they seek to lead.

My question for this consultation is: **How do we teach leadership toward an end held in common - toward the end that is covenantal community?** I am not proposing that leaders walk in lockstep toward this end; rather, each individual leader's vision would

offer variations on this vision of covenantal community relevant to the particularities of the institutional community they are seeking to create. Yet, this endeavor, I believe, would be new to the field of educating for Jewish leadership.

So, what does covenantal community look like in practice? Two quote again from this same recent publication:

“As I have written before (Gleanings Spring 2016 issue), all congregations share an aspiration vision of covenantal community, though most are not (yet) covenantal communities. Moreover, this aspiration is not just for congregations; schools, community centers, agencies of educational change, and educational start-ups can and should aspire to become covenantal communities. Albeit these organizations (including congregations) often work to provide engaging services to paying consumers, instill given knowledge in learners, and raise funding to do this work. All worthwhile ends, which are external to building community! Yet, if the work itself and the “community” of the organization – meaning the relationships among those engaged in the work – are viewed primarily as a means to those external ends, having no intrinsic value in itself, then we are re-creating collectivities and not community. We can’t avoid certain I-it ways of working, but good leadership moves us continually toward covenantal community

Let’s look at the day school, as an example. Traditionally, we have tended to view day schools as vehicles that instill a set of knowledge and skills into students. Yet, this has been changing; we are reconceiving day schools as spaces for nurturing ethical, empowered, and purpose-driven Jewish persons in the world. To do this, schools create educative experiences that engage students in wrestling with the best ways (as Jewish humans) to be ethical in the here and now of their school community. Through that immersive and reflective experience they feel the profundity of and learn how best to live in covenantal community, so that later in life they will desire to belong to a covenantal community through which they can fully embrace a Jewishly, ethical life.”

And, how do the leadership practices we sometimes teach conflict with seeking toward this vision?

The educational, business, and political literature is filled with recipes for successful leadership. Yet, most do not concern themselves with the ends toward which leaders lead, assuming incorrectly that the leadership skills and strategies that work to increase profits or lead armies (that is, leadership for collectivities) is easily transferable to any end one seeks. But, in seeking to lead toward covenantal community, leaders need to relate to followers in ways that empower them and are ethically valued in-and-of-itself. This is not the case with most leadership recipes.

For instance, leaders who inscribe their vision in stone and prescribe correct practices disempower their followers and foster “I-it” relationships with and among them. Actual community involves the community determining for itself the ways in which they want to be there for one another and the world in which they live. Through the process of building covenantal community, leadership is engaged in the paradoxical process of undercutting its own authority in order to empower its followers to co-lead.

By contrast, leaders working toward covenantal community can only begin by offering a vague image of the desired place they seek. The vision of community only becomes clear as the community itself gets better at being a covenantal community. Thus, they can’t with any certainty declare beforehand that these are the correct practices that will define our future community; rather, the correct practices are discovered through study, experimentation, and reflection. Albeit, they can learn from and adapt the discoveries (or re-discoveries) of others seeking the same. Nevertheless, a clear vision only comes at the end, as the vision increasingly emerges in the practice of the community.

In the last section of this publication, I offer a framework for thinking about the strategies of covenantal leadership. But, the purpose of this consultation, I am most interested in the challenges of educating emerging leaders to understand and commit to leading toward this this ancient and contemporarily relevant, common goal.