Journal of Textual Reasoning

Volume 4
Number 3 *Jewish Sensibilities*

May 2006

Some Reflections on Jewish Values, Jewish Sensibilities, and Their Transmission

Daniel H. Weiss
University of Cambridge

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr

Part of the Jewish Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Weiss, Daniel H.. "Some Reflections on Jewish Values, Jewish Sensibilities, and Their Transmission." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 4, no. 3 (2006): 61-73. https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-tbwc-pe89.

This Response is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Textual Reasoning by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Journal of Textual Reasoning 4:3 (May 2006)
ISSN: 1939-7518

Some Reflections on Jewish Values, Jewish Sensibilities, and Their Transmission

Daniel Weiss
University of Virginia

My initial understanding of Jewish sensibilities was shaped in large part by the example of my parents, and by stories I was told by my parents and grandparents about my great-grandparents, whom I never met. While it is impossible to reconstruct all the different points of influence, I describe a few here in order to give a sense of the worldview I eventually developed. For instance, I heard stories from my father about the different jobs he had worked before I was born, in schools and nursing homes, working with the mentally and physically handicapped. Though these were never described as specifically "Jewish" activities, somehow the two became intertwined for me. "These are the jobs my Dad had, my Dad is Jewish, my Dad is a role model for me–therefore these are Jewish things to do." Someone else might have started with the same premises without combining them to draw my conclusion, but the human mind, especially a child's mind, works in mysterious ways. To take another example, I vividly remember a story that my grandfather recounted several times about his father: "I was in shul with my father as a young boy. I saw

another man spit on the floor, and told my father. He said to me, 'Don't worry about what other people do–you worry about what you do.'" Words of wisdom from the archetypal immigrant Jew, conveyed to his great-grandson. That I had never met the man only added to the legendary quality of the story, and hence to my idealized image of Jewishness. Similarly, I heard from my father and grandmother how my Aunt Eva (actually, my great-great-aunt, whom I had met as a young child but never really knew well), another immigrant, had participated in labor rallies and was heavily involved in the Workmen's Circle. So, in addition to compassion and self-examination, social justice was added to the mix. Another part of my past that stands out in my memory is the fourth grade Sunday School class at Temple Beth-El, taught by my mother. There, the curriculum focused on Jewish values, explicitly designated as such. We learned about *kevod habriot*, *derech eretz*, *pikuah nefesh*, and other concepts with roots in the Jewish ethical and religious tradition. For me, these were not just fourth-grade-Sunday-School values; they were *Jewish* values, esteemed and embodied by Jews worldwide. To be a Jew was to be an ethical human being who was sensitive to others and worked to help those in need. At that time, I had little if any conceptual distinction between ideal Jewish values and attitudes and actual Jewish attitudes. Jews were supposed to be ethically sensitive, and so therefore they *were* ethically sensitive. Any observed exceptions in my youth and adolescence were written off as anomalies–later in life, I was sure, I would find many Jewish communities whose values resonated with mine. Jewishness was–had to be–a *goldene medinah*, whose streets were paved with ethical gold.

Importantly, while the values of Jewishness were to be found in the Jewish religious tradition, religious observance was separate from my category of being a good Jew, of being a *mensch*. A Jewish person could observe much or little (though Jews who observed a lot were kind of weird, sort of like those Christians who "believed" all that stuff), but the main point was to be found in one's empathy and efforts for helping other people. Note too that "other people" meant *all* other people, regardless of group boundaries. While I may have carried a Jewish/non-Jewish distinction in terms of ideal ethical standards (i.e. I felt more strongly that

Jews have an obligation to be ethical), there was no such distinction regarding the object of that ethical concern.

Fast forward to the present, where experiences and encounters of recent years had put a strain on the unity of the ideal and the actual. From a minyan of youthful tax attorneys in New York, to my growing awareness of Israeli military policies and the attitudes of many American Jews towards them, something was not right. I see Jews, but where are their Jewish values? What's going on? Despite these pressures, my idealized version of Jewishness was not so easily defeated. If the realities of the present are too incongruous, I must have subconsciously reasoned, then I will retreat to the past. Because these ethical values are *Jewish* values (really, they must be!), if they are not apparent now, that is only because they must have been lost–somehow–over the course of the past few generations. Just as I had dismissed individual instances that clashed with my preconceived notions as anomalies and aberrations, so now the present became a temporal aberration of recent origin. But, oh, that immigrant generation!–my great-grandparents, and all those Jews in the labor movement, and Yiddish–*they* must still have had the Jewish values. (And, conveniently, since that generation is no longer here, there was no risk of them proving me wrong. Because the past is not now, time-wise, it is that much easier to imagine that it also is not like now, value-wise.)

After reading Vanessa Ochs' essay on Jewish sensibilities, I continued to read and think about issues raised by it, seeking especially to apply her ideas to that generation of immigrant Jews in order to learn the details and sources of their values, and what had since become of them. In the process, I came to reassess some of my initial assumptions, and the very concept of "Jewish values" has been complicated and called into question for me. In particular, Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days*–her 1978 study of a group of elderly Jews (most of them immigrants from Eastern Europe) at the Aliyah Senior Citizens Center in Venice, California–was instrumental in combatting my romanticized vision, through its forthright portrayal of human weaknesses and frailties and by the way it gives faces to history. Here, keeping Ochs' article in mind, I present an analysis of *Number Our*

Days that explores the nature of Jewish values and sensibilities through a focus on their transmission or lack thereof.

One key assumption that I began to reconsider was the idea that values change or are lost only over successive generations. This approach views the values of any given generation as fixed and static possessions; while a gap may occur between generations, each generation has a stable grasp on its own values. If this were the case, a natural place to look for the breakdown would be in the process of transmission. However, Myerhoff's study of the Center people shows that apparent shifts in values can occur within a single generation. Consider Faegl's comment, which extricates Myerhoff from a budding quarrel: "Faegl rescued me. 'Basha! You think everyone who isn't a Zionist is an anti-Semite? Shame on you. You used to be an internationalist. You used to have beliefs.'"[1] Sofie, another Center member, extends this to the Center community as a whole: "Everybody here was a Socialist, a Communist, an anarchist twenty years ago."[2] Making a similar assessment, Shmuel also identifies when (from his perspective) the change occurred: "Those people at the Center forget their own past. Most of them were at one time Bundists, internationalists, at least Marxists. We all got along all right with our differences until the Six Day War in Israel. Then they went crazy with Zionism."[3] These three independent accounts indicate that this shift was a real phenomenon. The multiplicity of ways in which we might describe or account for it can shed light on what 'values' are, more generally.

For instance, one account that we might give is that the Center people previously had a strong commitment to internationalism for its own sake, that this was a deeply-rooted value of theirs. Nationalism and the wars it produces, they would have said, are contrary to our Jewish principles, which commit us to the sanctity of human life. In order to explain the shift in their attitudes, we would have to say that their values were altered or

---

[1] Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1980, c1978), p. 16.

[2] Ibid., p.134.

[3] Ibid., p.49.

readjusted by outside events over the course of the years. For instance, perhaps the violence of the Holocaust led them to reassess their ideas about the need for military and state power and the possession of land. In this portrayal, their values at both points in time are conscious, reasoned assessments of the situation at hand.

Another account would not attribute the change in attitude to a change in consciously-held values, but would instead suggest the Center people were not fully aware of their motivations at *either* stage. In their earlier decades, the Center people's outward claim was that they were internationalists, but the particular circumstances of the time could have concealed a potential inward conflict. That is, they may actually have had an affinity for internationalism, valuing its universalism in accord with the sanctity of human life, but they may *also* have possessed a tendency for group mentality and for us-versus-them thinking. Formerly, the second tendency may have lain dormant, since there was no Jewish state or military power to which it could attach itself. Thus, the first tendency could express itself without conflict, so that a person might not even realize that the second exists. He or she would have said, "I value internationalism, period," not "I value internationalism now, but that is only because there is no feasible way for my us-versus-them thinking to express itself." Later, when the outward circumstances had changed, the Center people were no longer internationalists. They may still have possessed the same beliefs about the sanctity of life, etc., but these were now dominated by other tendencies, which were there potentially all along. From this point of view, we could even say that their "values" actually remained constant throughout, but this term would now refer to the collection of potential tendencies, and not to the form of outward actualization at any one time.

For instance, consider Hannah's statement: "We mustn't forget that we are Jews because sooner or later someone will come along and remind us. We must hold on to our land, Eretz Yisrael, no matter who tries to drive

us into the sea."[4] A sense of Jewish persecution and an emotional commitment to "Eretz Yisrael" has long existed among many Jews, but the merging of this tendency with "we must hold on to our land" expresses an attitude that is a more recent manifestation. When the Jews had no land to hold on to, such a formulation would have been impossible. Yet, there may be a common human tendency for an individual or group to conflate the unavoidable circumstances of their life with their (ostensibly) freely chosen values. In the absence of a Jewish state, Jews might tend to describe attachment to land as a non-Jewish value. When the facts on the ground are different, Hannah's land-oriented approach could suddenly become quite consistent with other Jewish sensibilities.

This account does not imply that values will always shift with the winds of circumstances, but only that a person's attitudes at any one time may not yet have been put to the test. While one person's present values may be contingent, another person's may run deeper. For instance, Shmuel states, "I have always had mixed feelings about Israel. I told you I'm not a Zionist. Here is what I believe. Only life itself is sacred, not a nation. A nation is no different from any other–not America, not Israel, not Russia."[5] While most of his fellow Center people might have expressed similar sentiments at an earlier time, the fact that he does so in the 1970's, in the face of pressures to do otherwise, demonstrates the rootedness of this value in his worldview. Shmuel's gradual exclusion from the Center's mainstream also shows the potential for apparent unity to mask underlying diversity in a cultural group. Previously, when all of the Center Jews expressed their commitment to internationalism, an observer (and the Center Jews themselves) might have attributed this consensus to ingrained values instilled by their common Jewish culture. However, while they all valued internationalism to some degree, there was probably a wide range of attitudes concerning its *relative* importance, even at that time. The clashes that emerged when circumstances changed would not

---

[4] Ibid., pp. 94-95.

[5] Ibid., p.49.

be best described as a sudden loss of unity, but rather as the emergence of the diversity that was previously present only in potential.

Re-examining the issue of transmission in light of this model of values, we see that the agency of the transmitting generation is called into question. If the professed values of an earlier generation were in part dependent on their circumstances, they did not really possess or have full control over the values in a way that would allow them to hand them on to the next generation. Accordingly, the differing behaviors of the younger generation may have resulted not from a failure to pass on "values"–indeed, they may have possessed similar *potential* values as the older generation–but rather from the fact that the younger generation found itself in different circumstances, which led in turn to different actualized attitudes. In other words, it could be the case that the older generation, if placed in the circumstances of the younger, would have behaved in a similar manner. In this way, it would be possible to imagine that a set of underlying "Jewish values" actually *are* transmitted, but that they determine outward behavior and attitudes (i.e. what are normally called 'values') only in conjunction with external circumstances. Thus, when a similar outward attitude is observed across generations, this alone does not tell us which factor predominates: is it a result of a deeply-rooted, entrenched value that has been transmitted, or is it simply a result of similar circumstances?

Likewise, in the absence of a closer investigation, it would be a mistake to attribute generational differences to a 'decay,' since the earlier values may have been present only contingently and never as a stable possession.

Consider, as another example, the Center people's attitude towards the values of mainstream American culture. According to Myerhoff, "[T]hey provided a model of an alternative life-style, built on values in many ways antithetical to those commonly esteemed by contemporary Americans. The usual markers of success were anathema to them–wealth, power, physical beauty, youth, mobility, security, social status–all were

out of the question."[6] While their life may constitute an alternative life-style, it is for the most part not a freely chosen one. As Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century, their opportunities for accumulating wealth and power for themselves were extremely limited. Accordingly, it makes sense that they would have developed values that would allow them to hold themselves and their lives as morally commendable. However, we should distinguish between two different descriptions of their situation. On one hand, it could be said that they developed these values *only* because they were forced by their circumstances to do so. On the other hand, one might say that their circumstances enabled them to preserve their moral suspicion of wealth, allowing them to avoid even the temptation to avarice. Both descriptions, though, leave open the possibility that their values might have been different if they had been exposed to more favorable conditions. Less hypothetically, their children may not have inherited their parents' disdain for success, if only because their greater educational and economic opportunities (stemming from the sacrifices of their parents) presented them, perhaps enticingly, with the option of pursuing wealth and power.[7]

Once we consider the effects of changing circumstances, the idea of Jewish values becomes even more complicated and problematic. What is it that makes Jewish values or Jewish culture "Jewish"? We would normally want to include a normative element in the idea of Jewish values, in that they are something that Jews *should* hold on to and esteem. However, the 'should' implies the possibility of a 'can'; if something is not possible, we don't say that someone 'should' do it. If Jewish values from past generations have been in part dependent on favorable circumstances, the degree to which they can be voluntarily adopted or transmitted is lessened. We can say descriptively that *these* were the values displayed by *this* Jewish community at *this* time, but we may not be justified in saying

[6] Ibid., p.20.

[7] On the relation of an individual's values to change in circumstances, compare Prov. 30:8-9: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but provide me with my daily bread, lest, being sated, I renounce, saying, 'Who is the Lord?' Or, being impoverished, I take to theft and profane the name of my God."

that this was the case *because* those Jews were steadfast and morally conscientious in maintaining their values. Rather, those values may have been the product of Jewish efforts *combined with* the presence of other factors that encouraged the preservation or intensification of those values. A later generation may be even more steadfast and put even more effort into preservation, but if they live in a very different environment, their efforts may be of little avail. If this is the case, they can hardly be faulted for being unable to preserve "Jewish values," since the prior generation's level of willful commitment would have also been insufficient in such circumstances.

Thus, what seemed at one point to be 'characteristically Jewish' cultural values and sensibilities may turn out to have been quite conditional. This applies in particular to the ethical values that concerned me, such as awareness of and resistance to economic and military-national power and injustice. As a result of my recent readings, I feel that my initial intuitions were partly correct, in that these sensibilities *were* relatively prevalent among the Jewish immigrants to America. However, since it also appears that such sensibilities were largely (though not entirely) transitory, I am now more hesitant in labeling them as "Jewish." At the same time, I am also aware that sensibilities that are presently still common among Jews could be similarly contingent, so that any use of the term "Jewish sensibilities"–except in a provisional sense–seems problematic. Certainly, it seems unwise to depend on supposedly indigenous Jewish cultural values as a guarantor of Jewish ethical behavior, especially if such a dependence leads to a willful ignorance of actual behaviors, which may have been the case with me. Shmuel's questions thus take on a tragic and plaintive quality: "Now the Jew never did cruelty to others like the Germans, but he never had the chance.

Do we know if his culture is strong enough to make him safe from greed and cruelty? The Jews have not been tested in our day. Because if

our culture does not do this for us, then you have to ask, what is the good of it?"[8]

Looking back at my earlier desires, I see myself as seeking confirmation of the Jewishness of my own values. Not content to view them only as the heritage of my immediate family, nor as a set of yet-unrealized ideals, I wanted to find a living Jewish community of *mensches* , even if I had to travel back in time to find it. Also, perhaps I felt that if I could find evidence that these were *real Jewish values* in previous generations, people today might feel more obligated to live up to them. "See, this really *is* part of what being Jewish means–here is my proof!" "Oh, gosh, I didn't realize. I'd better change my ways." I wanted to call upon history (or what I hoped was history) to support me, so that I wouldn't be standing or speaking alone. In Shmuel's terms, I "wanted our culture to do this for us."

Now, I am more divided. On one hand, since the historical evidence reveals diversity and fragility as two chief characteristics of Jewish culture and values, it seems not fully honest to teach or proclaim that "These are Jewish values!" The simplicity and stability of this statement do not mirror the facts. On the other hand, I can find true support for the values I esteem in significant *parts* of Jewish tradition, both religious and cultural. Thus, I can legitimately satisfy the fundamental human desire to see myself not as an isolated speck in time, but as part of an historical continuity. By preserving both of these poles, I feel that I can live by, stand by, express, and argue for my values as Jewish, pointing to past exemplars who have embodied them, while avoiding uncomprehending confusion and frustration when other values appear more dominant in broader Jewish circles, both past and present. For some, this balance might always have been obvious, but it took me some time to more fully reach this point. Academically, I feel better able to explore the relations among Judaism, Jewish culture and tradition, and moral living, hoping that my own transition away from idealization will allow me to recognize similar tendencies in different theoretical accounts of Jewish religion and culture.

---

[8] Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, p.194.

Lastly, I have increased gratitude and respect for my parents and family, now recognizing that the values I learned from them were largely the result of their own distinctive concerns and sensitivities as individuals, and did not simply flow naturally or automatically from their "Jewishness."

In relation to Vanessa Ochs' essay, the analysis presented above points to an extension of some of her ideas, but also to certain reservations. While I agree with the general thrust of her argument–that Jews may possess ethical sensibilities deriving from sources other than knowledge of *halakha* –she does not give sufficient attention to the diversity and potential instability of such sensibilities. For instance, while she writes about "Jews" and "Jewish sensibilities" in general, I would pose the questions: Jews from where?

Jews from when? Would American Jews whose forbears immigrated from Germany display the same sensibilities as those whose families came from Eastern Europe? Where would Sephardic Jews fit into the picture? Are the sensibilities of American Jews in 2006 the same as those in 1906, 1936, or 1976–taking into account both socioeconomic shifts and dramatic historical changes and upheavals?

I feel that Ochs is correct in shifting the conversation about lived ethical values towards broader cultural influences and away from a narrow focus on Jewish texts and *halakha*, considered in isolation. However, this same insight makes generalizations about "Jewish values" more difficult. It may well be the case that many Jewish immigrants to America shared a roughly similar cultural background–as was the case for Myerhoff's subjects–in which traditional Jewish teachings and practice played a major and inescapable role in shaping cultural norms. Accordingly, it stands to reason that many of the cultural values would mirror rabbinic concepts to some degree, even when the individual Jews were less educated or non-practicing. However, the situation of later generations, or even of that same immigrant generation later in life, was often informed by very different environmental and cultural features. To be sure, successive generations of Jews did retain certain commonalties, and we would expect to see some similar attitudes or sensibilities. Even

so, the relative priority of those sensibilities in ultimately determining lived attitudes and actions may vary widely. While American Jews may have received, via cultural transmission, the ethical values of *tikkun olam* and *tzelem elohim*, might not sensibilities stemming from the influences of consumerism or chauvinistic nationalism sometimes prove more decisive?[9] This state of affairs could apply to Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox Jews, in accord with Ochs' observation that even the former's ethical sensibilities are often shaped by other factors, apart from knowledge of *halakha*.

I thus take a position in between Ochs' view–which seeks to defend the Jewish ethical values of Jews who are unlearned in or do not follow the traditional rabbinic norms as codified in *halakha* –and the view she presumably seeks to oppose, i.e. that knowledge of *halakha* is always necessary and crucial for the transmission of Jewish ethical values. While ethical values may be passed down without the traditional Jewish terminology, it seems to me that explicitly formulated principles, texts, and practices could play an important role in strengthening and bringing to consciousness sensibilities that might otherwise have remained undeveloped and inactive. Particularly when many other pressures–some not so ethical–go into shaping of contemporary American sensibilities, knowledge of traditional Jewish concepts could provide a stabilizing effect. While Ochs claims that conscious knowledge "is *not* the precondition for effective cultural transmission from one generation to another," it may be that the truth of this statement depends on the particular cultural environment in question. If certain other cultural reinforcements are present, conscious knowledge may be less important. In other contexts that lack such reinforcements, or for certain types of sensibilities, conscious knowledge could be more crucial for successful and continued transmission.

---

[9] On the other hand, it may well be the case that the influence of American culture on Jews may have strengthened or intensified some of the ethical sensibilities described by Ochs. Conversely, certain unethical sensibilities found among some Jews today may in fact derive from successful Jewish cultural transmission, though there might be disagreement over what counts as 'ethical' and what as 'unethical.'

Then again, such knowledge may itself be insufficient or ineffective. In the absence of other cultural factors such as ethical role models in family and community life, knowledge of Jewish ethical formulations is likely to remain at the level of "in the head," without making it to the heart or the hands. In contrast, as Ochs suggests, other vehicles of cultural transmission can often plant values in the heart and hands, without their needing to be in the head. Given the variations in American Jewish cultural settings, it should not be surprising to find that many Jewishly uneducated or non-observant individuals may embody the traditional rabbinic ethical principles (perhaps without knowing their names) more than do many Jews who are "*halakhically* observant." Though it might be difficult to carry out, it would be interesting to see a study that examined the relationship between lived ethical values and religious knowledge/observance among American Jews. While interviews and surveys can display the way that Jews *verbalize* values, they do not necessarily correspond to the ways that their values are actually embodied.

In that it portrays the transmission of Jewish ethical values as an effortless cultural phenomenon, as a process that occurs "naturally," Ochs' presentation seems a bit too optimistic. Her argument could be made more solid by acknowledging that ethical transmission may sometimes fail to occur and by seeking to account for the relevant factors in this process. Likewise, rather than speaking of "Jewish sensibilities" unqualifiedly, it may make more sense to specify a particular Jewish sub-culture and/or time period. If these caveats were included, her overall point–that ethical values are shaped by a wide variety of influences, not all of which are textual or explicit–would stand out even more forcefully and effectively.