

## Pluralism at the American Hebrew Academy

Pluralism, the focus of much attention in today's society, can be difficult to define. In "From Diversity to Pluralism," Diana Eck specifies that pluralism is different from diversity; diversity is the mere presence of differences, while pluralism is the engagement of those differences.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Eck creates a complex, five-part definition of pluralism which specifies the requirements of pluralism. Eck, however, does not have a monopoly on pluralism. In her essay entitled "Pluralist Education," Susan Shevitz specifies three different types of pluralism in Jewish education: generative pluralism, demographic pluralism, and coexistence pluralism.<sup>2</sup> In this view of pluralism, generative pluralism is defined as a type in which "participants risk reassessing and revising their own ideas by hearing and learning from others." At the American Hebrew Academy (AHA), a pluralistic Jewish boarding school in Greensboro, North Carolina, pluralism is just as complicated as Eck and Shevitz make it out to be. Here, pluralism can be defined as a mixture of the two theories: Shevitz's generative pluralism created through Eck's five-part definition.

At the American Hebrew Academy, pluralism is an important part of the education process, since "the Academy seeks to educate the whole student, mind, body, and soul."<sup>3</sup> According to *HaMadrich*, the student handbook, "Pluralism at the American Hebrew Academy supports different paths to a fully Jewish life. Each student should

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Eck "From Diversity to Pluralism," *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*, [http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from\\_diversity\\_to\\_pluralism.php](http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_to_pluralism.php).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Shevitz, "Pluralist Education, *Sh'ma*, [http://www.shma.com/march\\_06/pluralist\\_education.htm](http://www.shma.com/march_06/pluralist_education.htm).

<sup>3</sup> *The American Hebrew Academy*, <http://www.americanhebrewacademy.org>.

share in an active effort to engage in the Jewish tradition -- intellectually, emotionally, behaviorally and spiritually -- so as to find ever developing and expanding ways to integrate our Jewish heritage into our lives.”<sup>4</sup> However, according to Rabbi Howard Cohen, interim Dean of Jewish Life, this is a big statement. In his understanding, “pluralism is wrestling lovingly and compassionately with people who hold strong, different interpretations of how to live Jewishly.” In this way, pluralism is not a mission which has an end goal; instead, it is an attempt to create an environment in which people can successfully communicate their differences, work together, and learn from each other. It is this experience which the Academy attempts to infuse into its students.

According to Diana Eck, the first step to pluralism is “active engagement with... diversity.”<sup>5</sup> At the American Hebrew Academy, this occurs naturally because AHA is a community. Unlike at a day school, where students’ interaction with Judaism often stops when the final bell rings, Academy students are in a pluralistic environment 24/7. The pluralism which exists at school is a part of all aspects of life, from academic classes to Shabbat *minyanim* to friendships created among students.

The next requirement in Eck’s list is “knowledge of our differences.”<sup>6</sup> This, too, manifests itself in daily life at the Academy. As a school, AHA’s business is knowledge. As a pluralistic school, it offers a dual curriculum of college prep classes and Jewish studies.<sup>7</sup> In adherence to the school’s mission, it seems like pluralism should be taught within the Jewish studies curriculum. Indeed, this is done; every freshman enrolls in a class which discusses the various movements of Judaism and their differences. Other

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<sup>4</sup> *The American Hebrew Academy.*

<sup>5</sup> Eck, “From Diversity to Pluralism.”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *The American Hebrew Academy.*

classes emphasize the analysis of various ideas within Judaism, such as classes on Jewish philosophy and Eco-Judaism. However, according to Rabbi Cohen, pluralism also manifests itself within the secular classes at the school. While pluralism is not emphasized in these classes, students are not separated by religious movement, so students from various backgrounds come together to engage in the same curriculum. Thus, a *frum* student and a Reform student may become lab partners in a Chemistry class, and throughout the year they work together despite their religious differences. This is a more subtle manifestation of pluralism, but it instills into students the knowledge that religious differences do not in themselves lead to a lack of ability to work together.

The third part of Eck's definition is that pluralism "makes room for real and different religious commitments."<sup>8</sup> This is shown at the American Hebrew Academy through the formation of the daily morning *minyan*. As part of the religious obligation of being an AHA student, each homeroom is required to attend morning services for one week out of every six. This rotation ensures that there is a *minyan* for any community member who needed to recite *Kaddish* and that no student leaves the Academy unfamiliar with the traditions of the morning service. Currently, there are two separate *minyanim* that students can attend: a daily Orthodox minyan, or a more liberal minyan which rotates between Conservative, "R"—meaning Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal—and meditation services depending on the day. Although it seems like this should detract from the overall pluralism of the school, Rabbi Cohen insists that it actually enhances the pluralism. With this organizational structure, no student is ever asked to compromise his or her religious principles. Thus, a student is not forced to *daven* behind a *mechitza* if it goes against his/her principles, nor a student is forced to *daven* without one if that is what

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<sup>8</sup> Eck, "From Diversity to Pluralism."

s/he believes is required for a service. Whereas Orthodox services used to be included in the rotation, this new system respects students' beliefs, which relieves some of the resentment seen in previous years. Also, both services are open, so students who do not have a strong belief over the use of a *mechitza* are free to switch between the *minyanim*.

According to Eck, "pluralism in America is clearly based on the common grounds of the First Amendment of the Constitution: 'no establishment' of religion and the 'free exercise' of religion."<sup>9</sup> As a religious institution, the American Hebrew Academy does not quite fit this requirement. Although the Academy is not affiliated with any particular movement, one of its goals is to "nurture future Jewish leaders,"<sup>10</sup> and the Admissions department only accepts Jewish applicants.<sup>11</sup> Religion is also established within the functions of the school. For example, according to *HaMadrach*, while students are allowed to eat whatever they want off campus, all food in the dining hall is *kosher* and only dairy and *pareve* items are allowed on school grounds.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the policies of the school are strict enough to cater to the most religious of its students, while students retain, for the most part, their right to "free exercise" of religion as they see it—as long as they don't impede on the experiences of their classmates.

The last requirement in Eck's list is "the nurturing of constructive dialogue, revealing both common understandings and real differences."<sup>13</sup> Because classes at AHA are discussion based, much of this dialogue occurs within the classroom. However, dialogue between students also happens informally outside the classroom. Because students live with each other in close proximity for nine months out of the year, they

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *The American Hebrew Academy*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Eck, "From Diversity to Pluralism."

learn to form relationships and friendships with students of other backgrounds. Throughout these relationships, many issues are discussed, among which are issues of Jewish life and identity. Although Rabbi Cohen emphasizes that these discussions are “ebb and flow,” as is the case with much of informal education, they do exist. On the Academy’s promotional video, Rebecca Sundheim proves this point: “My favorite thing about AHA,” she says, “is always learning something new about Judaism because there’s so many different types of people here that you, you’re never in question, there’s always someone to ask.”<sup>14</sup> This quotation implies that students discuss their Judaism outside of class, and that they feel comfortable asking their peers about their views. This is exactly the type of environment which the American Hebrew Academy attempts to create, and if Rebecca was truthful, they seem to have succeeded.

Pluralism at AHA does not fit simply into the box of Eck’s definition of pluralism, however. Eck’s definition implies that while people from different backgrounds engage with their differences, this experience does not alter their own beliefs. This is not the case at the American Hebrew Academy. While students enter the Academy from different religious backgrounds, their religious practices and beliefs fluctuate during their time at AHA. Because many different religious options are available to students, they tend to “shop” for the practices and beliefs which best fit their present personal ideologies. This differs from Robert Wuthrow’s idea of shopping because students are limited to practices and beliefs already established within Judaism, but this still leaves students with a wide variety from which to choose.<sup>15</sup> Students rarely leave the Academy with the same religious beliefs with which they entered, and even those students who do have been

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<sup>14</sup> *The American Hebrew Academy.*

<sup>15</sup> Robert Wuthrow, “Embracing Diversity: Shopping in the Spiritual Marketplace,” *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

exposed to other ways of being Jewish which might not be found in their home communities. This fits the definition of generative pluralism exactly.

Pluralism, which is such an integral part of life at the American Hebrew Academy, is almost as complex as Judaism itself. However, pluralism is not indefinable, with the right criteria. At the American Hebrew Academy, pluralism is enacted as a tool through which Jewish teenagers discover their own connections to the Jewish people and grow into knowledgeable Jewish leaders. This goal, which adheres to Shevitz's definition of generative pluralism, is achieved through Eck's five-part definition of pluralism. Functionally, it works; stories are told of students who were minimally involved in Jewish life at AHA but became highly involved in their Jewish communities at college. As Rabbi Cohen said, AHA is "a transitional experience in the lives of... students," and the real goal of the Academy as a pluralistic institution is to plant the seed of pluralism within students for use in dialogue throughout their lives as they continue to learn, grow, and interact with others.

## Protocol

As interim Dean of Jewish Life, how would you define pluralism?

How does AHA, as a pluralistic school, meet this definition?

Can you give me an example?

Who is involved in this mission?

Have there been any major issues since you have been at AHA?

I've heard that you reformatted the way *shacharit* services work. What changes did you make?

How does this make *shacharit* more pluralistic than it was in previous years?

It seems like AHA places a large emphasis on students learning from their fellow students. Do you think that this plays a role in the pluralism that AHA tries to achieve?

From your observations, to what extent does this really happen on campus?

I know that AHA does not keep these statistics—or at least, they didn't used to—but can you estimate the percentages of students and faculty from the different movements?

## Resources Consulted Prior to Interview

The *American Hebrew Academy* website, both the public sections (including the promotional video) and those accessible only by members of the AHA community (including *HaMadrach* and the monthly newsletter)

My own experience during three years as a student at AHA

## Bibliography

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