

Minimalist Autonomy and Haredi Education in Israel

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In “Education for Autonomy, Education for Culture,” Dana Howard attempts to break the impasse between those who emphasize a cultural community’s claim to the right to educate its young “for culture,” and those who insist that an education “for autonomy” is the only way to foster the capacity for critical reflection on the life options available to those of us who live in liberal pluralist societies. Howard maintains that a comprehensive religious education such as that undertaken by ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel is not necessarily at odds with the ideal of autonomy, provided that one redefine autonomy so as to do justice to what it means to live a life shaped by profound religious commitments.

In the face of ongoing criticisms within Israel about the risks of financing a system of education that is not only potentially at odds with liberal educational ideals, but also essentially supports a religious community that is frequently at odds with the state’s liberal aspirations, Howard makes a case for the legitimacy of continued state support for ultra-orthodox education.¹ Interestingly, she does not make this case on value pluralist grounds that the state should support what William A. Galston would call the “expressive liberty” of cultural groups “to live in ways that others would regard as unfree.”² Nor does she make her case by arguing that the cultural identity of a Jewish state is so some degree bound up with the need to ensure the cultural continuity of ultra-orthodox Jews. Either of these justifications would more adequately explain Israel’s continuing support for Haredi education. Instead, Howard contends that an ultra-Orthodox education is not inconsistent with the core liberal emphasis on autonomy. It is this second step that is most intriguing. Why is Howard so determined to regard autonomy as *the* rationale for continued state support (that is, financial support) of Haredi education? And what is gained by conceiving of autonomy as a willing acceptance of a way of life shared with one’s constitutive community?

Much might be gained from such an understanding. For one thing, it reminds us that we do not decide what our cultural commitments will be in a detached way, but rather as selves that are already constituted by particular cultural attachments. These attachments are likely to lead us toward some ways of life and away from others, which is why autonomy is not always best understood as a matter of making choices between seemingly equivalent life possibilities. While it would not be accurate to say that we are *determined* by our constitutive communities, we are certainly *conditioned* by them. This conditioning puts some life possibilities out of range and steeps us so deeply in others that it becomes almost impossible to imagine ourselves otherwise. This is why Howard proposes that in the case of the ultra-orthodox in Israel, autonomy is better understood as “willing” rather than “choosing.”

In what follows, I will lay out some reasons for my contention that conceptualizing autonomy in this weakened way does not justify the state’s support for Haredi

education on the grounds that it is autonomy promoting. This is not to say that there are not other good reasons for continued state support of Haredi education. However, further conditions would need to be met before one can make the claim that Haredi education meets the criteria for the development of the capacity for minimalist autonomy — to use Rob Reich’s helpful formulation.³

From the perspective of autonomy promoting theories of liberal education, there is much to take issue with in the Haredi education system. Israeli educational policy makers have raised questions about the ways in which Haredi schools are regulated — or largely unregulated, as the case may be — by the Ministry of Education. Despite a state mandated basic program, which calls for a minimum number of hours of study of “general subjects,” it appears that there is wide latitude in the degree to which this program is implemented in Haredi educational institutions. At the secondary school level, for example, all five “general subjects” had been stripped of their secular context and were now firmly rooted in religious culture: Bible, Talmud, Hebrew language, Hebrew grammar, and Jewish history.⁴ If Varda Schiffer is right and children in Haredi schools do not receive the allotted hours of the basic educational program, the state has essentially abrogated its responsibility for seeing to it that the criteria for the development of minimalist autonomy are adhered to.

The above example points to the degree to which comprehensive religious education can, if left unchecked, fail to provide students with the minimal conditions that would promote the development of their capacity for autonomy. Of course, a great deal hinges on what is meant by the term autonomy. As Reich notes, “it is not always clear that theorists are talking about the same thing when they describe autonomy. . . . Autonomy turns out to be an extremely slippery concept.”⁵ Given both the slipperiness of the term, and its centrality to Howard’s argument in favor of state support for Haredi education, it would be well to examine the conception of autonomy articulated in this essay.

Liberal educational theorists tend to equate the development of the capacity for autonomy with the development of the capacity for choice. Conceiving of autonomy as choice gets at one key requirement for the development of autonomy — exposure to alternative ways of life. But the emphasis on choosing a way of life as though from a menu of equally feasible alternatives misses a crucial aspect of cultural identity formation, namely, that one might, upon reflection, affirm the way of life in which one is already embedded. As Reich’s conception of minimalist autonomy makes clear, developing the capacity for autonomy ought not be taken to imply that one has to reject the way of life one shares with one’s constitutive community. It might well lead one to affirm this way of life. The crucial thing is that one has affirmed this way of life for oneself as a result of considered reflection.⁶ On this view, autonomy can certainly be understood as a willing endorsement of the values and way of life of one’s constitutive community based upon considered reflection. As Meir Dan-Cohen explains, “on the will conception of autonomy, one is an author of one’s life æ hence autonomous æ insofar as one willingly embraces different aspects of it because one finds them meritorious and the life that comprises them to that extent

worthwhile.”⁷ Howard maintains that this is how the principle of autonomy operates in Haredi culture. She writes, “it is the general Haredi canon that he has accepted this lifestyle of adherence to the law through his own agency and by his own will.”

My concern is that while the Haredi might well regard this to be the case as a matter of principle, their educational system does not lay the necessary groundwork for the development of the capacity for autonomy in practice. While it is clear that Haredi children are well prepared to take on the demands of the life of the Haredi community, are Haredi children in a position to decline to follow such a path? For this question to be meaningful, members of the Haredi community would need some exposure to alternative narrative trajectories. In addition, Haredi youth would also need some opportunities to develop much needed vocational, technical, or professional skills if they are to be in a position to opt out of rather than affirm the life choices laid out for them. In the context of an education “for culture,” one cannot insist on these developmental prerequisites. But in the context of an education “for autonomy” they are essential. Of course, here what becomes an issue is whether the state has a right to mandate that cultures smooth the way for the right of exit. This is perhaps too much to ask of minority cultures which are already anxious about their status and continuity in the modern world. But it is not too much to ask of states that profess to support the development of autonomy in their youngest citizens. An education that supports the development of minimalist autonomy will need to do more than steer young people in an inevitable direction. It will have to provide these children with the kind of education that would give them options should they decide to refuse rather than reaffirm the commitments of their community of origin.

1. These criticisms are made in a recent report by Varda Schiffer, *The Haredi Education in Israel: Allocation, Regulation, and Control* (Jerusalem: Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, Jerusalem, 1999).

2. William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 29.

3. Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 89-112.

4. Schiffer, *The Haredi Education in Israel*, 32-35. Schiffer notes that this is the case for the Ashkenazi Haredi sector and not the Sephardi Haredi sector. She explains that the Sephardi Haredi community “is less closed and maintains ongoing contact with the secular environment,” 35.

5. Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism*, 90.

6. *Ibid.*, 101.

7. Meir Dan-Cohen “Conceptions of Choice and Conceptions of Autonomy,” *Ethics* 102 (1992): 241.