I am a Christian of the Quaker variety whose life work has focused on education in secular settings. But the root system of my approach to teaching and learning—which I’ve been writing and speaking about for the past forty years—reaches deep into the Jewish tradition. That’s one reason, among many, that I was grateful for the invitation to write a foreword to this superb collection of chapters on Israel education.

At first glance, Israel education would seem to have little, if any, relevance to the broad sweep of educational issues under debate these days; e.g., the rise of the common core in our public schools or the decline of the liberal arts in higher education. But because the chapters in this anthology are largely concerned with foundational questions of pedagogy—questions about how we teach as well as what we teach—they have an important contribution to make to the larger, long-term conversation about education reform.
What Anne Lanski, Executive Director of the iCenter, says about Israel education in “Welcome to Israel Education: A New Century,” I believe, is true of all education rightly understood:

Israel education is as much about shaping character, personality, mind, and social connectedness as it is about ‘furnishing an empty room with information.’ It’s actually a part of what our tradition, thousands of years ago, asked us to love ‘with all your heart, soul, and might!’

An I-Thou Education

In 1983, I published To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education. That book—part of my long-time effort to challenge the dominant objectivist model of contemporary education, an effort shaped in part by the early influence of Martin Buber in my life—included these words:

In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel… ‘It is impossible to find Truth without being in love.’ … This intimate link between loving and knowing is implicit throughout the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The Hebrew Bible uses the word ‘know’ to indicate the conjugal relation of husband and wife (as in ‘Abraham knew Sarah’), the same word it uses for our knowledge of G-d and of the created world… The images that inform the biblical understanding of what it means to know—images of personal involvement and mutuality—are neither accidental nor antiquated. They reflect the quality of knowing at its deepest reaches, the quality of a truth that draws us into community.

By objectivism I mean an approach to education that:

1. Holds teachers, students and subjects at arm’s length from each other for the sake of pure knowledge, uncontaminated by human hands;

2. Focuses on downloading objective facts into the learner’s mind;

3. Treats subjectivity as if it were a disease to be cured rather than an essential component of being human and of knowing;

4. Ultimately leads us to respond to each other and the world as a set of I-It rather than I-Thou relationships, destroying community in the process.

I do not need to remind readers of an anthology on Israel education about the immense evil that can result when people objectify each other or, worse still, the
other. Objectivism is a deadly toxin for which love, rightly understood, is the only antidote. Any education that hopes to contribute to the healing of our wounded world must have love at its core.

Of course, love is a word that needs to be used with care when it comes to teaching and learning. In popular parlance, the word suggests a kind of attachment, even enchantment, that undermines the capacity for critical thinking that is the fruit of authentic education. The romantic love that gives rise to the old saw, “Love is blind”—and to the conviction that the beloved can do no wrong—has no place in an education that aims at helping us see ourselves and our world more clearly.

**Love Rightly Understood**

But there is another kind of love without which there can be no education worthy of the name, a love that is both the origin and the outcome of authentic education. It is best illustrated by a story from the heart of science about the Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock.

Obviously, McClintock’s scientific work met the rigorous standards of logic and empiricism, without which one does not win a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. She was no slouch when it came to objective facts! But her work was also animated by a way of knowing that can only be called intuitive, relational, even mystical, one that is foundational to all great science. When McClintock died at age ninety, she was eulogized by a colleague as “someone who understands where the mysteries lie” rather than “someone who mystifies.”

McClintock’s work was chronicled in a book by Evelyn Fox Keller, professor of history and philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Keller asked McClintock, in effect, “What’s the key to doing great science?” then summarized her answer in these words:

> Over and over again [McClintock] tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to ‘hear what the material has to say to you,’ the openness to ‘let it come to you.’ Above all, one must have ‘a feeling for the organism.’

Biographer Keller sums up McClintock’s genius in a single luminous sentence that defines the kind of love that both animates authentic education and is its outcome. In her relation to corn plants, Keller writes, McClintock achieved “the highest form of love, love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference.”
When pressed for her scientific secret, this Nobel Prize-winner speaks not of data and logic, though she was a master of both. Instead, she speaks of embodied relationships and feelings. As one writer says, McClintock “gained valuable knowledge by empathizing with [the] corn plants [she studied], submerging herself in their world and dissolving the boundary between object and observer.”

She regarded these plants not as objects to be held at arm’s length but as subjects, as beings. Violating the “arm’s length” approach of the objectivist quest for purity, she entered into a live encounter with her subject, brought her own subjectivity or selfhood into the equation, and emerged with knowledge of how genes do their work that broke new ground on which geneticists still stand.

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Love and Critical Distance

This, it seems to me, is what we want for every learner in every field of study: a capacity to draw close to the subject at hand, to feel one’s self personally related to it, all the while allowing that subject to be what it is, to speak its own voice on its own terms, never projecting one’s preferences, prejudices, or personal needs upon it. Knowing animated by this kind of love forges an I-Thou relationship in which we never blur the boundaries between each other—or, worse yet, try to remake each other—the way we often do in romantic love.

I-Thou knowing not only allows us to know a subject intimately and well; it also helps us maintain critical distance, which is the essential difference between education and indoctrination. Because it is rooted in respect for the integrity of both the knower and the known, I-Thou knowing allows us to have what theologian William Sloane Coffin called a “lover’s quarrel” with the subjects we study. Writing about American notions of patriotism, Coffin made some distinctions that have relevance for an Israel education: “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country.”

Love, rightly understood, forges the kind of communal relationships in which we can have creative conflicts with one another—conflicts over the nature and meaning of things we care about too much to allow them to suffer from faulty observation or flawed interpretation. Of course, every observation and every interpretation is likely to be partial or penultimate and needs to be checked and corrected. Conflict over what we are seeing and what it means is the engine that advances our knowledge, if we hold conflict creatively in a community of inquiry bound together by love of the subject and of each other.

“Truth,” as I have written elsewhere, “is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.” Truth is often thought to reside in the conclusions we reach in conversations. But surely that cannot be right: in every field I know anything
about, from theology to astrophysics, the conclusions keep changing as new observations, new interpretations, and new conflicts arise among us. If we want to live in the truth, we must have the habits of heart and mind to live in the great conversation.

So, to quote Anne Lanski again, the goal of education is not to furnish “an empty room with facts”—though learning the relevant facts as they are currently understood is clearly an important step along the way. The ultimate goal of all education, from pre-school through higher and adult education, is to equip students to participate in an unending process of agreeing and disagreeing, then doing it all over again, hanging in with each other for the long haul. This is not only the process that advances our knowledge—it is the process by which we keep weaving and reweaving the tattered fabric of the human community.

Teaching is Risky Business

This anthology offers a set of deeply insightful explorations into a pedagogy that creates live encounters with a subject—encounters conducted in and for community, animated by conflict, bounded by discipline, and grounded in love. Those are the marks of an authentic education. But none of them will show up in the classroom, or any other educational setting, until a real teacher shows up—a teacher who can hold the uncertainty and complexity of the ever-changing force-field that genuine learning requires.

Despite a century of reasoned, research-based pleading for a pedagogy that prepares students for real-life engagement—with themselves, other people, and the needs of the larger world—filling people’s heads with facts remains the dominant mode of teaching. There’s a simple reason for that sad fact: lecturing at people while protected by a podium and expertise leaves teachers invulnerable by giving them total control over the process.

But creating space for a live encounter between teacher, learner, and subject is risky business. It can take us in unexpected directions, leaving teachers vulnerable when they don’t know the answer to a question, or when it becomes clear that they must abandon their agenda and improvise, or when conflicts arise that are difficult to negotiate.

In I-Thou teaching and learning, much depends on what goes on inside teachers at moments of this sort. Are they filled with the ego-driven fear that comes from not wanting to look bad in front of students? Or are they filled
with the kind of soulful love of learning and of learners that can normalize such moments as part of the educational adventure, making them easier to handle?

A fearful teacher will fake it or get flustered, defensive, or even angry when confronted with a question he or she cannot answer. But a teacher who works from a more grounded, soulful place—who understands that teaching and learning are communal activities—can more easily say, “Great question! I have no idea what the answer is. Let’s find out together.” Such a teacher models what it means to be a life-long learner, freeing students from the tyranny of having to get it right every time and sending them into the world as people who know how little they know and aren’t afraid to learn.

When we take risks, we will fail from time to time, and the very prospect of failure pushes many of us out of our comfort zones. But once again, love rightly understood can take us where the ego fears to go. The kind of love I have in mind is one I have heard defined as “the willingness to extend yourself for the sake of another person’s growth,” which is exactly what good teachers do for their students.

This anthology is filled with wise and useful chapters on pedagogical techniques that will make Israel education a live encounter between teachers, learners, and subjects. But, as all these writers know, good teaching can never be reduced to technique. Ultimately, good teaching comes from the selfhood of a teacher who can skillfully navigate the twists and turns of the inner landscape of his or her life.

So as you read these chapters, reflect not only on what and how you teach. Reflect also on who it is that teaches—which is to say, yourself—and the religious tradition in which you stand. That tradition offers all you need to know about the kind of love—love of G-d, world, others, and self in all their confounding complexity and unsurpassed glory—that underlies authentic teaching and learning.

Endnotes


Parker J. Palmer, Founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a well-known writer, speaker and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books—which have been translated into ten languages—including the bestselling *To Know As We Are Known, Let Your Life Speak, The Courage to Teach, A Hidden Wholeness,* and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with ten honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”