

The Perils of “Digital” Thinking: On School-Board Elections, Book-Banning, and Education in the Meganet-Age

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Parashat B’midbar 5783 / May 19, 2023

So, we had a school board election this week. What a fascinating thing to witness.

Before moving to Great Neck, honestly, I can’t remember even knowing who was *on* the school board, let alone feeling a significant stake in the outcome. I’m guessing it was probably that way for many of you, too, in the not-so-distant past.

But we live in a different time now, when absolutely everything in life is politicized and polarized. And as sad and pathetic as it is, I guess it’s not surprising that—in our highly charged environment—the armies of red and blue would seek to conquer even the education of our children.

And, *of course*, they would—because, although we may not be accustomed to having blowout fights about what our kids should be learning in school, the education of children is an enterprise with the highest of stakes.

Because it’s in school, more than any other environment, that children are formed as intellectual beings. School plays a central role in acculturating children into the values and aspirations of their community.

At its best, school can be a venue for what the philosophers of the Enlightenment called *Bildung*, a German term meaning “human self-cultivation mediated by worldly experience.”¹

As described by the scholar Ned Curthoys, “*Bildung* rejects an instrumental conception of education and instead embraces a dynamic process of self-formation that opens new vistas of knowledge and experience. ... [It’s about] a well-rounded education of body and mind that develops personality and educates towards freedom rather than servile obeisance to social hierarchies.”²

In the post-Enlightenment world of the 18th and 19th centuries, many German Jews, including the intellectual forefather of Modern Orthodoxy, Moses Mendelssohn, embraced *Bildung* because it valued curiosity, inclusion, and universalism.

On the other hand, school at its worst can be a venue for rigid ideological indoctrination, as it was in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Because the character and quality of our schools shape the future citizens of our community, the question at the heart of any debate about what children should be learning in school is, ultimately, “What kind of community do we aspire to be?”

It seems to me that this is what we were voting on this week. And it was such a tense election because there are drastically different views on this question among the residents of our community.

Apart from the tenor of the campaign, which was excessively mean and personal, the most troubling issue, to me, was the impulse by some to ban or censor books that express ideas or deal with topics that they feel are inappropriate.

I am deeply disturbed by this because, whatever the topics of the books are, I am against censorship.

I am against it because I believe school should be a place where students are exposed to the vastness of human experience and the richness of ideas.

In my view, it's not the job of schools to teach students *what* to think, but it *is* their job to teach students *how* to think.

And to do that, they have to expose children to a maximal diversity of ideas and create an intellectual environment where they are encouraged to question and debate with their peers and teachers.

We live in an infinitely complex and nuanced world, and our schools ought to be what the psychologist and author Adam Grant calls "learning zones," where students "feel free to experiment—and to poke holes in one another's experiments in service of making them better"³; where they "learn to recognize complexity as a signal of credibility."⁴

These learning zones should "favor content and sources that present many sides of an issue rather than just one or two." And children should be taught to "fight our tendency to accept binaries by asking what additional perspectives are missing between the extremes."⁵

This is the kind of freethinking, curious, pluralistic community I, for one, want us to be, and book banning is antithetical to that vision.

Those who would go down that path would not only compromise the intellectual and character formation of our children, but, in my view, they would also threaten the well-being of our society—because, as Grant puts it, "Polarization is reinforced by conformity."⁶

I am grateful that the citizens of the Great Neck Public Schools district voted against book banning and in favor of an expansive and open-minded approach to education in the spirit of *Bildung*.

But we all know this is only a temporary stay.

Not only will this fight likely reignite in the next school-board election cycle, but I fear that broad global trends much bigger than our little community here on Long Island are working against our vision for an open, expansively thinking society of the future.

These trends are not being fueled by the red team or the blue team, nor are they being fueled by human beings at all, at least not directly. They are being fueled by technology: what the technology expert David Auerbach calls the "meganet."

He argues that, as this digital network connecting everyone and everything around the planet continues to expand at a rate that is neither controllable nor comprehensible by the human mind, the meganet is *reeducating* us in how to think and how to speak—and this is already fundamentally altering our reality.

How so?

Auerbach explains that as “brilliant” as computers are, they are mainly capable of processing *quantifiable* data—in other words: *numbers*. Hence, the term “digital” technology.

They are *not* very good at understanding the nuances of human language, at least not yet.

In order to do all the amazing things social media and commercial networks like Amazon do for us, they need our data in forms that can be *counted*.

This is why, Auerbach explains, platforms like Facebook have learned to move away from inviting text-language input to soliciting quantifiable input like “likes” and emojis: because while a computer can’t easily discern what people think about something by reading complex and nuanced text, it *can* tell that information by counting thumbs-ups and retweets.

We probably don’t even realize it, but because we are interacting with the meganet constantly and in every corner of our life, it is actually teaching us to speak and think like computers—in simplified, binary terms.

To understand why this is happening, it’s worth quoting Auerbach at some length:

“As the meganet values crude, more sortable aspects of humanity and human expression, it will condition us all to express ourselves in more regularized, simplistic, and computable ways.

“Nuanced and implicit forms of human interaction will go by the wayside because they will count for less in the meganet-driven world. A long and complex sentence will disappear in the mass of the meganet, while likes and emojis will help algorithms neatly classify us.

“Individualized forms of human communication will fade, replaced by standardized means of expression devoid of nuance and creativity. We will find ourselves speaking more robotically, using dumber and more utilitarian means of verbal expression.

“It will become more difficult to differentiate computer-written texts from human-created ones not because AI will gain some brilliant capacity for human thought and expression but because human thought and expression will increasingly become as predictable and superficial as AI-generated text.”⁷

In short, the exponentially increasing power of technology is teaching us to be less nuanced and less complex in our thinking, and to reflexively categorize ideas, ourselves, and others into simplistic and rigidly defined boxes.

All this is apropos as this Shabbat we begin the most “digital” book in the Torah, the *Book of Numbers*.

The opening chapter contains God's instructions to Moses and Aaron on how to take a census of the Israelites; hence the English name of the book: *Numbers*.

But amidst all the counting, the prominent 13th-century Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (Ramban) takes issue with the idea that God wanted Moses and Aaron simply to process and record data.

"The Holy One told Moses to count them each with respect and to treat each one of them with the honor due to greatness," says Ramban.

He imagines God saying to Moses and Aaron: "You shall not say to the head of the family: 'How many people are there in your family? How many sons do you have?' But they are each to pass before you with awe and in respect, and you shall count them."⁸

By this he means: Human beings are not numbers, and the human experience is not something that can so easily be quantified.

Each human being is complex, nuanced, and sophisticated in his or her own way; each represents a whole world. To reduce them simply to a tally in a stone or a digit in an algorithm is to obliterate that world.

That's what Egypt did when it enslaved us. To turn infinitely complex people into simplistic, computable data is to return to Mitzrayim, the narrow place.

But God dwells in the broad place, *b'midbar* (which is the Hebrew name for the *Book of Numbers*). And God revealed the Torah to us there, in the wide-open wilderness.

Why? Because that's where the human mind and spirit have room to be inquisitive, and explore and experiment with ideas, and encounter the vast wisdom humanity has to offer.

That's the kind of place our schools should be.

In this age of hyperpolarization and proliferating meganets, both of which seek to simplify and reduce the human being and the human experience to crude and narrow data, our schools have to push back against that trend and create expansive learning zones for our children.

That's the kind of community we aspire to be.

And we will never get there by banning books.

1 Ned Curthoys, "Redescribing the Enlightenment: The German-Jewish Adoption of *Bildung* as a Counter-Normative Ideal," 1

2 Ibid., 7

3 Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, 218

4 Ibid., 171

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 127

7 David B. Auerbach, *Meganets: How Digital Forces Beyond Our Control Commandeer Our Daily Lives and Inner Realities*, 286-287

8 Ramban, *Num.* 1:45, Sefaria translation

