

# LEARN OR DIE: COVENANTAL COMMUNITIES AS A NEW APPROACH TO HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Chapter One, Pages 18-21:

## *Judaism as an Appropriate System for Comparison*

In my previous work (Plaskoff, 2003b), I explicitly noted two elements which infused a Jewish perspective into CoP theory: intersubjectivity and the Three B model. My thoughts about intersubjectivity have been influenced by the relational Jewish philosophy of Martin Buber as developed in his classic philosophical work *I and Thou*. The Three B model is derived from the work of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism (see Gillman, 1994). Digging deeper, however, will reveal not only additional influences, but also some new ideas that can continue shaping this learning theory.

While I believe that all religions (and I use this term here cautiously) have something worthwhile to provide learning theory, I believe that Judaism can provide unique insights for a number of reasons:

- *Analogy of Survivalism*. Currently, businesses are struggling to survive the radical changes they face, such as increased competition and dispersion of the workforce. Judaism, for several thousands of years, as a “corporate

entity,” has had to deal with similar challenges—competing belief systems, a scattering of its adherents, and radical global changes. As Ariel (1995) points out:

The Jewish people is one of the few to have endured continuously since ancient times and to have adapted effectively to changing circumstances. No other people has maintained its devotion to its ancestral homeland while also developing methods of preserving its identity throughout a centuries-long diaspora. The persistence of Judaism since antiquity, despite repeated efforts to eradicate it, demonstrates a durability that both provokes and mystifies its enemies. To Jews and non-Jews, the survival and longevity of the Jewish people are nothing short of a miracle. (p. 110)

A key element of this survivalism is learning and education (Sacks, 1993; Wirth, 1943). But the approach is not traditional and conventional. As Sacks (1993) states:

From the very outset, Judaism predicated its survival on education. Not education in the narrow formal sense of acquisition of knowledge but something altogether more vast [sic]. Indeed the word ‘education’ is altogether inadequate to describe Judaism’s culture of study and debate, its absorption of texts, commentaries and counter-commentaries, its devotion to literacy and life-long learning. Descartes said: I think, therefore I am. A Jew would have said: I learn, therefore I am. If there is one leitmotif, one dominant theme linking the various eras of the people of Israel, it is the enthronement of education as the sovereign Jewish value.

It serves us well, then, to look at the role learning plays in the survival of social organizations and what lessons we have to learn from Judaism’s fight for survival.

- *Supreme and sacred focus on learning.* As noted above, Judaism has embraced learning as a core principle unlike any other religion or belief system. Rituals in Judaism are not just symbolic or dogmatic; they are designed as learning tools and lessons. Daily prayer is infused with

learning. The Jews as the “People of the Book” have spent several thousand years studying, improving, philosophizing, and developing systems of learning and education.

- *Evolving civilization rather than religion.* Unlike religions that were developed around belief and focus on afterlife, Judaism is an evolving social system focused on action in the here and now. Of the 613 commandments that Jews are obligated to follow, more than 100 concern business and economics. The sacred literature outlines a code of civil, business, and moral law for everyday conduct which infuses the everyday with spiritual meaning. This type of system holds promise for finding a balance between the demands of everyday life and eternal spiritual needs.

- *Reflecting the trends in the literature.* Adult Education and HRD have recently taken a critical turn. Some equate this with “critical thinking” skills (a cognitive view). However, Critical Theory stemming from Marx and Freud, developed by the Frankfurt School as a socio-political philosophy, has distinct Jewish undertones. Therefore, to truly apply and understand Critical Theory more adequately, one must consult the latent philosophical source of this movement. Adherence to creed and accepted dogma does not allow for full expression of this theory, but the anti ideological nature of Judaism, I contend, does.

By analyzing Judaism as a social practice that has focused so intently on learning and on the integration of ethnos, ethos, and ethics, we can gain considerable insight into the role

of learning and the role that HRD professionals can play as those responsible for enhancing practices in a company.

One other note is worth mentioning. Actually, there is not a single Judaism; rather, there are a number of Judaisms that stem from the same textual base—the Torah. Some tend to be more traditional, or conservative, some more liberal. Some are more literal and strict, while others are more interpretive and flexible. It is difficult to define a single Judaism. Therefore, what I present here is my interpretation of Judaism, informed by a Reconstructionist approach and deriving from a reading of Talmudic texts. It is one Judaism amongst many. Some who take a different approach or have different interpretations of Judaism may find significant fault in what I define here. In some sense, that is to be expected, since that is one of the strengths of the Jewish people—the ability, nay the right and imperative, to respectfully disagree.