Classroom and Democracy

Yair Eldan

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The best—and at the same time the most problematic—metaphor for describing the situation of liberal academic faculty members at Israel's academic colleges is to regard them as the cannon fodder of the liberal camp. The metaphor is apt because a war of values is indeed taking place in Israel, one that stands on the verge of civil war. Faculty members at the academic colleges are indeed on the "front line," since the students in their classrooms come from every part of Israeli society and belong to the opposing camps. Yet the metaphor is also problematic, because using the language of "war" and "cannon fodder" in the context of academic teaching calls into question the very possibility of sustaining a space of learning in the classroom. Learning takes place within a space possessing a dimension of openness: a feeling that every opinion may be voiced, confronted by means of rational —and emotional—arguments, and used to lay the groundwork for the capacity to resolve similar questions in the future. A space of war is foreign and opposed to all these things. It imposes an "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" mentality. It annihilates complexity and censors skeptical or critical positions.

There is, admittedly, a well-known saying:

> Even a father and son, or a master and disciple, who study Torah together at the same gate become enemies of one another. Yet they do not depart from there until they come to love one another, as it is said: "Vaheb in Suphah" (Numbers 21:14). Do not read *ba-Suphah*—"in Suphah"—but *be-sofah*—"at its end" [a wordplay suggesting that love emerges at the end of the dispute].[1]

This saying employs the metaphor of war to describe a debate between sages in the study hall. It is clear, however, that the use of such a metaphor not only conflicts with the atmosphere required for classroom learning but also possesses the potential to escalate the situation, because it constructs reality rather than merely describing it. The saying itself contains such a movement: it describes the charged atmosphere that may develop during an ideological debate, but its negative dimension immediately calls for mitigation. Moreover, the study hall is not a classroom in the sense that its

members enjoy greater equality of status than exists in the relationship between a lecturer and the students.

During three years of a creeping constitutional coup; of living under a government whose prime minister is under criminal indictment and has even granted a convicted criminal control over the police; and of a war that began with the October 7 massacre—and in view of the fact that students at the colleges belong to both sides of the social divide—teaching at a college has become exceedingly complex. How is it possible, if it is possible at all, to sustain a space of learning when not only are the students divided by profound disagreements, but the lecturer also holds clear and unequivocal positions regarding the ethical questions at issue?

This question becomes particularly pressing in light of the accumulated knowledge concerning learning and meaningful learning. Such learning requires the processing of knowledge, its connection to what the student already knows, and a mental reorganization of the structure of knowledge within consciousness. It places the student at the center, requires students to engage in processes of thought, and encourages them to become aware of those processes. The classroom must therefore be a space set apart, in which students can think openly. The sanctity of this space also embodies an important liberal principle originating in Mill's school of thought: social knowledge is created within an open environment that filters out unfounded positions. Learning can therefore take place only in a space in which freedom of speech permits a genuine confrontation with the preconceptions of lecturers and students alike. If I cannot express my resolute opposition to the constitutional coup and substantiate it with arguments—or permit students to express their own views without fear—then there is very little chance that the classroom will host discussions that prompt the students to process knowledge, organize it, and observe the processes they are undergoing at that time.

After all, from the perspective of the liberal public, the creeping constitutional coup is not merely "another issue" about which people disagree. It has the potential to transform our way of life from its foundations, to control the contents that reach our consciousness, and to abolish the possibility of meaningful learning altogether. The same is true for supporters of the judicial reform. In their view, strengthening the Jewish character of the state and fortifying the government's ability to act without restraint express their deepest identity and constitute the basis for justifying the existence of the State of Israel. Were I to reveal the full intensity of my feelings concerning the motives behind the coup, its purpose, and the character of those leading it, I would immediately alienate the students who support the reform, as well as those who seek to produce agreement concerning the degree of control

the government should exercise over the other branches. Truthfully, my difficulty in expressing the full force of my genuine positions within the classroom regarding so fundamental a matter—one that is, in fact, relevant to every subject raised there—is also connected to fear.

The students who support the constitutional coup express their positions forcefully and, at times, with the same crudity that characterizes the "poison machine" of political vilification outside the classroom: the portrayal of academia and the "Left" as enemies and traitors, accompanied by an industry of public shaming. All these currents blow through their comments in class and arouse apprehension and fear within me at the prospect of daring to express positions that they regard as "extreme." I do not reveal the secrets of my heart to the students, both to ensure that they will open their hearts to hearing my—partial—thoughts and to avoid becoming *persona non grata* in their eyes.

Were I not afraid to say so, I would describe my position as that of a kind of "Marrano of reason," to use Yirmiyahu Yovel's description of Baruch Spinoza.[2] Yet that would imply that I believed reason to be entirely on my side, which is not the case. I am a skeptic, and this skepticism is an inseparable part of my identity. My unequivocal position regarding the constitutional coup, however, was formed in response to the immediate threat to the character of the state and my fear for my children's future. The students are, of course, aware of my liberal views, but they do not know the extent to which I feel endangered or how frightening I find the present situation.

In class, I do not disclose my diagnosis that we are living through a period of "to be or not to be." I confront my views with conservative positions as a kind of thought experiment. Out of severe inner tension, and out of a desire to create an open space of learning, development, and cultivation of the critical faculty, I allow positions that I curse and revile within my own consciousness to be heard. I respond to them and allow the students to witness the manner in which I make room for those who are other and different, even as the very doorposts of my soul tremble. Outside the classroom, I regard some of the government's supporters as *tinokot shenishbu*—literally, "children taken captive," a rabbinic image of ignorance arising from circumstances beyond one's control. I regard others as people who exalt money, power, or honor (responding from a sense of victimhood to the historical humiliation inflicted on them by the Ashkenazi Mapai elite), or as people motivated by religious and messianic fundamentalism, or as all these things at once.

One might assume that, under such conditions, in which the conversation is not grounded in truth—either on my part or on the part of the many students who moderate their responses—it would be extremely difficult to sustain learning. The truth must nevertheless be told: despite my partial

Marranism, the impulse toward restraint, shared by me and many of the students, created a certain space for open conversation and learning. It did, in fact, enable me to make processes of thought and criticism visible to the students within the subjects I teach. The students who held extreme conspiratorial positions or supported granting unlimited power to the executive branch and the prime minister neither disrupted these processes nor participated in them. They appeared to have excluded themselves from this space in advance and contented themselves with making their voices heard. My tactic—yet another military metaphor—of Marranism had a positive effect upon everyone else, who constituted the majority. They felt that the classroom was an enabling space, a space in which it was possible to think clearly and openly. The very treatment of the classroom as a space that one must enter with caution had a beneficial effect on its atmosphere and on our ability to learn together. The problem was that the students' trust in me was not entirely well founded, because it rested upon the partial picture I had presented to them.

When the atmosphere in the classroom is enabling and students from across the political spectrum are present, it becomes difficult to delineate the boundaries of classroom discourse. Racist views, conspiracy theories, and violent statements are routinely voiced by some students. One also hears positions supporting revenge as a military and ethical method; views that regard Jews as superior to other human beings; support for a biblical right to the land—a deed of title granted to the Jewish people by God; and, of course, repetitions of conspiracy theories circulated on Channel 14, according to which the army initiated the October 7 massacre. One also encounters claims that the "deep state"—the rule of unelected officials—was responsible for initiating the investigations of the prime minister and bringing him to trial. Statements are heard condemning the air-force pilots—"the pilot's mother sleeps perfectly well at night"—and praising the exemption of Haredim from military service—"the Torah protects the people of Israel." There are also more "commonplace" positions defending the power of majority rule to determine primary arrangements—the basic policy choices laid down in legislation—that violate rights and even damage the state's fundamental character. Confronting claims of this kind greatly impeded the capacity to teach. The students frequently rely upon false and erroneous information and are convinced of its accuracy. They are so filled with conviction that nothing I or their classmates might say will shift them from their positions.

Another matter that made it extremely difficult to generate profound processes of thought among the students, despite their partial Marranism and my own, was the fact that throughout the past year, Arab students' voices were no longer heard in class as they had been in the past. In general, the

physical presence of Arab students in the classes declined dramatically compared with previous years, and their participation in discussions also diminished.

The difficulty of defining the boundaries of classroom discourse naturally affected the learning itself. An extreme response to a conspiracy theory would influence the general atmosphere and expose my profound anxieties, while an excessively mild response would provide space and legitimacy for such a position. For the most part, I adopted an attitude of dismissing such positions and presenting them as ridiculous without engaging with them at excessive length. Yet the truth must be acknowledged: although such a response delineated a kind of invisible boundary around the discourse toward which I was directing the class, it also had an adverse effect upon learning, at least for a certain period during the lesson. I was constantly required to maneuver between the sanctity of the classroom and the fear that the very voicing of racist or totalitarian views would profane that sanctity.

The rules of the game therefore very quickly became the focus of attention, even though I did not usually address them explicitly. Questions such as when the discussion should be brought to an end; when the discussion itself appears to detract from the ability to learn and open oneself; whether everything should be permitted to be said or whether a boundary should be imposed; and whether to respond aggressively, dismissively, or through a measured, quasi-parental setting of limits—all became central. In miniature, the classroom reflected the process through which the boundaries and ground rules of discourse are worked out in relation to the questions underlying the social conflict in which we find ourselves.

Philosophers of education have long recognized that one of the beneficial consequences of relational pedagogy is an authentic appreciation of democracy. The argument is that, if the relationship between teacher and student—and the care and trust between them—lies at the center of learning, then this deep acquaintance will identify the distinctive talent and interest of each student. Not everyone will consequently leave school with the same degree of knowledge and education. Nel Noddings regards the internalization of this fact as a democratic matter: the acceptance that a society functions within a network of professions, talents, and forms of labor, and that every person has a distinctive role within it. She distinguished Aristotelian “virtue ethics,” which emphasizes the morality, character, and actions of the social agent, from an “ethics of care,” which focuses on relationships and on a person’s qualities through the prism of the relationships within which those qualities exist, rather than solely upon the character of the individual.[3]

According to Noddings, this distinction has practical implications. Within an ethics of care, dialogue will take place not only concerning routine matters, but also concerning care and concern and the different forms they assume for different people and within different contexts. Dialogue with the student requires the teacher to attend to the student's motives openly, sincerely, and attentively—to take them into account, explore them, and respond to them.[4] Noddings argues that caring based upon virtue rather than upon an ethics of care effectively determines in advance what students require. Such care is conscientious, but it frequently destroys the joy of teaching and learning, as well as the relationship with the students, and directs education toward goals such as success in examinations and high grades. Noddings therefore places the emotional and social processes occurring in the classroom and the school at the center of the educational system. These processes are the boughs and branches of socialization and of the capacity to cooperate with others.

When this position is borrowed from school classrooms and applied to academic education at colleges, it proves to possess a contemporary and even acute dimension. The pedagogical methods employed at a college admittedly do not focus upon relationships with the students or upon the relationships among the students themselves. Those relationships are nevertheless certainly present as elements within my teaching. By analogy, the very willingness of most of the students and of myself to conduct a lesson while refraining from fully revealing our views—and while accepting a certain degree of Marranism that leads to tolerance—also reflects our ability, as a democratic society, to continue cooperating with one another. At the same time, our success in cooperating during class was based upon a discourse that was not entirely open. The trust created between the parties was not grounded in a full revelation of our personalities during the lesson, in a manner that would subsequently generate empathy and fellowship. It was instead grounded in the goodwill expressed by all parties when they chose not to display the entire spectrum of their identities, in order to remain in conversation with the other (Jewish) participants. It was therefore limited. Doubts and negative emotions continued to seethe beneath it.

Like every Marrano, as Yirmiyahu Yovel observed, I was affected by the reality of the classroom space as it seeped into me. Paradoxically—and, I must admit, to my alarm—positions that I rejected and criticized outside the classroom penetrated my consciousness and made me more moderate. An intriguing mixture of feelings and sensations was thus created: on the one hand, the tolerance and moderation characteristic of anyone conscious of their internal contradictions; on the other, feelings of inauthenticity and self-criticism.

After some time, once the students and I had learned how much to reveal and how much to conceal in order to sustain classroom discourse, a feeling emerged that all sides had lost a certain degree of interest in the lessons. It became apparent that my goodwill and that of most of the students were insufficient. Although we did not speak of it explicitly, as time passed, the effort that the students and I invested in concealment in order to create a protected space in which conversation could take place appeared increasingly futile. We sensed the paradox at its foundation. The effort arose from the desire that the classroom should be a place in which students felt comfortable, could express themselves freely, and could examine the manner in which they thought about the world. During the lesson, it became evident that this was not a theoretical matter, but a concrete one: the desire not to hurt actual people who shared an emotional and physical space with us. It was a form of classroom fellowship, or solidarity for the purpose of learning. Yet if solidarity is indeed the foundation stone that leads to concealment within the shared space, what does that solidarity actually mean?

This question prompted melancholy reflections concerning two American attempts—both poignant—to create solidarity where it does not exist. The first is David Foster Wallace's attempt in his well-known address "This Is Water," in which he urged students to resist their natural, hard-wired tendency to see themselves as the center of the world.[5] Wallace insisted that he was not seeking to preach morality to the students or advance a humanistic or ethical agenda, but merely to encourage them to resist the manner in which nature and culture directed them toward individualism, atomism, and consumption. For Wallace, such resistance possesses an existential dimension: it generates a feeling of being alive. From a distance, however, it appears to be an attempt to create feelings of empathy and concern for the other. Wallace asks the students to judge favorably the rude and aggressive people surrounding them in the supermarket line or on the road. Wallace seems unaware that the very attempt to create such empathy where it is absent demonstrates the intensity of that same "human wiring's" longing for solidarity.

The same applies to John Rawls's theory of justice, according to which the just principles for distributing social goods must be determined from behind a "veil of ignorance." Rawls attempts to generate empathy and mutual responsibility by means of a thought experiment requiring every person to imagine themselves in another's place, particularly in the place of someone whose socioeconomic condition is bleak.[6] Both thinkers proceed from the assumption that American society, as a society of immigrants, will not accept humanistic or socialist arguments as the basis for solidarity, and they therefore avoid presenting their arguments in those terms.

Like them, my Marranism also reflects an indirect attempt to create a feeling of closeness where one does not exist. Its very premise is that the students and I have despaired of engaging substantively with the profound disagreements that will arise during the lessons, and that we do not believe others will be capable of accepting us as we are. If the classroom space does indeed reflect something of the broader social sphere, two insights may be validated through it. Social solidarity should be cultivated in a variety of ways, because it is the foundation of acceptance, the capacity to make room for others, and communication. At the same time, any concealment or avoidance of presenting the true and complete positions of each party to the dispute will prove beneficial only in the short term.

Notes

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 30b.

[2] The image evokes the crypto-Jew, publicly conforming to one faith while maintaining another in secret. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1, *The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton University Press, 1989).

[3] Nel Noddings, "Care Theory and Practice," Hebrew translation in *Hed HaHinuch*, no. 6 (April 2008), p. 60. See also Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (The Open University of Israel, 2012), p. 213 [Hebrew edition].

[4] Noddings, *Hed HaHinuch*, ibid.

[5] David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water," commencement address, Kenyon College, 2005; cited here from Assaf Gavron's Hebrew translation in the Hebrew collection *Girl with Curious Hair: Stories and Essays* (Sifriat Poalim, 2011), p. 175.

[6] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, trans. into Hebrew by Dafi Agam-Segal (Yedioth Ahronoth, 2020).