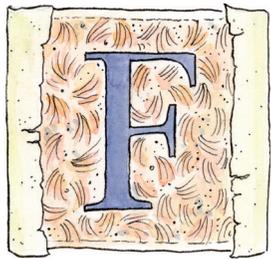


The Merit of Meritocracy



EW SAPIR READERS may remember, if they ever knew, the names of G. Harrold Carswell and Roman Hruska. Carswell was a federal judge from Florida who, in 1970, was nominated by Richard Nixon to the Supreme Court. Hruska was a Republican senator from Nebraska. When Carswell was criticized for being a mediocre jurist, Hruska offered a memorable defense.

“Even if he were mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers,” the Nebraskan said. “They are entitled to a little representation, aren’t they, and a little chance? We can’t have all Brandeises and Frankfurters and Cardozos.”

The defense of mediocrity became an instant laugh line. And the implication of “Brandeises and Frankfurters and Cardozos” was lost on nobody. Hruska was accused of antisemitism and Carswell’s nomination was defeated in the Senate. In the America of the day, Jewish names were bywords for intellectual and professional merit. And that kind of merit won the day.

Merit—excellence worthy of recognition—no longer holds the same place in American life. Not that the country has turned wholly against merit. We worship it in professional sports. We cheer it on *Jeopardy!* We respect it when a neighbor’s child gets into MIT. And we remunerate it munificently in many walks of life.

But Americans are paying increasing attention to a broader set of social and moral considerations, not all of which sit easily with our celebration of merit. We also value inclusion, diversity, background, “lived experience,” representation, participation, feelings, equity, and social justice, to name a few. And we worry, understandably, that meritocracy can easily slip into a self-perpetuating, self-dealing *de facto* aristocracy where the accident of one’s birth matters a lot more to one’s chances in life—in terms of family stability, quality of education, social and professional connections, and future income—than do effort, initiative, and talent.

There is something to be said for these concerns, particularly in a democracy that believes its highest purpose is the well-being of the many, not the advancement of the gifted few. And there are rich veins in Jewish tradition to reinforce that belief. Intellectual brilliance is not synonymous with moral worth. The clever can be mean. The successful can be callow. Office superstars can be miserable parents or spouses. Conversely, society’s ostensible losers—at least when it comes to educational achievement, economic fortune, or social prestige—can still teach us a lot about effort, dignity, decency, and common sense.

One way to meet the promise of a free and equal country is to devalue the currency of merit before it can buy too much. It’s a concept that a growing number of Americans—and American Jews—seem eager to embrace.

But is it the wisest way? It’s a question we need to ask more insistently as the assault on meritocracy gains ground.

Some critics of the current meritocracy claim that all they want is a better meritocracy — one that harnesses a much broader range of talent, perspective, and experience to the overarching goal of excellence in every field.

Yet this laudable attempt to expand opportunity to previously marginalized groups has been a feature of American life for decades. It happens every day in the civil service and the military, in media and the arts, schools and universities, corporations and nonprofits, charities and houses of worship — basically wherever possible. None of this ought to be controversial (even if the means of achieving it are), provided that the clear goal is the inclusion of a wide variety of people *into* institutions that uphold standards and produce excellence, rather than inclusion *at the expense* of standards and excellence.

That is not what is happening today. Instead, we are moving, at head-turning speed, into a world where excellence is becoming a secondary goal at best, and where normal standards and expectations aren't merely being adjusted or eased but rather are overthrown and erased. A few examples:

- As of 2022, more than two-thirds of colleges and universities—including Harvard and the University of California system—have eliminated the SAT and other standardized tests as part of their admissions requirements. A frequent justification: Women and some minority groups tend to underperform on the exams. Now there are calls to do away with LSAT exams for law schools and MCATs for medical schools, for precisely the same reason.
- In October 2020, the San Diego Unified School District — the second-largest in California — ended traditional grading policies as part of an effort to “combat racism.” The problem was that too many minority students were getting failing grades. Among other changes, students would no longer be penalized for turning in late assignments, while

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classroom behavior would “count towards a student’s citizen grade, not their academic grade,” according to a local news report.

- In May 2020, the National Board of Medical Examiners permanently canceled the Clinical Skills Exam as part of the United States Medical Licensure Examination. The move came following pressure from medical students. There’s now a growing movement to abolish state bar exams as requirements for the practice of law. As one article in the *California Law Review* explained, the bar exam is a “system of oppression” that was “designed to keep ‘undesirable’ (read: non-white, non-male) lawyers out of the profession.”
- In recent years, the question of whether math education is racist has taken center stage in school districts nationwide. A Gates Foundation-funded program for middle-schoolers emphasizes the importance of “Dismantling Racism in Mathematics Instruction,” so that teachers may “shift their instructional beliefs and practices toward antiracist math education.” One goal in this overall effort is ending the practice of “tracking” — putting children of different abilities into different

classes—on the grounds that it is part and parcel of a culture of “white supremacy.”

- Also in recent years, there has been a concerted effort to dismantle gifted-and-talented programs for younger children in public schools, and to abolish or alter the entrance requirements for academically selective public schools. One proposed change, as described in the *New York Times*, is to “establish variable passing scores so that economically disadvantaged, Latino or Black districts face somewhat lower bars than a wealthy majority-white district on the Upper West Side.”
- A 1999 paper by Tema Okun, which has since become a landmark in antiracist pedagogy, lists the following as “characteristics of white supremacy culture”: “*Perfectionism*...tendency to identify what is wrong”; “*Sense of Urgency*...makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive”; “*Worship of the Written Word*...the organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared”; “*Individualism*...desire for individual recognition and credit”; and “*Objectivity*...requiring people to think in a linear fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways.”

There are scores of similar examples. The common thread is that if standardized tests and other objective and uniform measures of performance lead to disparate outcomes not only among individuals but also between groups, then they must be the result of a “white-supremacy culture.” This, in turn, must be dismantled completely and replaced with “antiracist” systems that emphasize subjective criteria and equality of outcome.

How does this theory account for the fact that Jews and Asian Americans—two groups that historically have been victims of white-supremacy culture—tend to overachieve on those supposedly racist measures? It doesn’t. And will the assault on meritocracy help its intended beneficiaries? It won’t.

The truth regarding that last point was brought home to me in a conversation last year with an eminent surgeon (himself a member of a minority group) at a university-affiliated hospital. He was lamenting an effort, being pushed by medical students, to eliminate class rankings in medical school. “If I’m performing a surgery with a younger doctor who was at the top of his class, then I don’t care whether he’s Hispanic, Asian, white, or black,” he said. “But if I can’t see his rank, that’s when bias is going to come creeping back. You can’t afford incompetence when a life is on the line.”

The surgeon was making the commonsense point that prejudice is what happens in the *absence* of objective standards of judgment, not because of them. Grades may not be measures of a person’s character or future potential. But they are reliable indicators of current ability and competence in a specific field—a window into a person’s mind, regardless of the color of skin. Close that window and the invidious stereotypes return.

Implicit in his observation were two additional points.

The first: The assault on meritocracy isn’t child’s play. In many places, personal safety is at stake. Would meritocracy’s critics want their children cared for by second-rate physicians and nurses? Or want them to travel in planes designed by careless engineers and flown by ill-trained pilots? Or wish them deployed to military units led by inept officers? A defining feature of our time is a creeping incompetence in nearly every walk of life, due to the erosion of basic skills such as critical thinking, numeracy, even literacy—with 130 million American adults incapable of reading above a sixth-grade level.

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The second: People at every level of life usually want quality. One way or another, the surgeon was going to enter the OR with the best younger colleagues he could find. Patients will seek out

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physicians with excellent reviews. Employers look for new hires well suited for the jobs being offered. Consumers will look for trusted brands and services. When institutions are well run, they create formal structures in which excellence is made visible through transparent and verifiable criteria. When they are badly run, people find ways to get around an institution's incompetence. Those most able to do so usually have financial means, inside knowledge, and good connections. Left behind is everyone else, a reality known to anyone who has lived in a developing country or a socialist one.

This is the tragic, if predictable, result of the anti-meritocratic agenda. Erasing formal standards—in the form of grades, rankings, admissions requirements, job qualifications, professional certifications, and so on—doesn't make the underlying standards go away. It simply makes them more difficult to meet. Expectations become unclear. Incentives to work hard disappear, particularly for those who are (falsely) assumed to be incapable of meeting those standards. Subjective criteria in admissions, hiring, and promotions foster resentments—including racial resentments—among those who feel they have been unfairly excluded or rejected. (Anyone who doubts this should read the complaint, filed on behalf of Asian-American students, in the case of *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, now before the Supreme Court.) The subjectivity and unabashed tokenism also spark corrosive inner doubts among those who suspect they are unqualified for the positions they hold.

It isn't easy to quantify the consequences of all this, in part because many of the changes are relatively new, in part because it's hard to disentangle the effects of the Covid pandemic from the effects of new policies. Anecdotally, one hears constantly from experienced doctors, attorneys, professors, grade-school teachers, newspaper editors, book publishers, and others lamenting the broad and steep decline in the aptitude, attitude, and demeanor of their younger colleagues. The basic complaint: a mix of incompetence, incuriosity, hypersensitivity, and relentless political activism—everything, that is, except the qualities needed to sustain excellence in the long term.

Maybe there is a touch of “kids these days” in this criticism. And maybe things will change as today's twentysomethings realize that most institutions don't exist to perform a social justice function, don't thrive on in-house struggle sessions, and don't have a future if they are better at serving the moral demands of their younger staff than the practical needs of their customers.

Still, it's hard to shake the feeling that thousands of American institutions are being irrevocably damaged by the new anti-meritocratic dispensation. By and large, these institutions—whether the New York public-school system or Yale Law School, the *Washington Post* or the American Medical Association—serve important civic functions, have altruistic intentions, and are led by people with sensibilities that are liberal, in both the classical and contemporary sense of the word. It remains to be seen whether the intolerant solipsists now coming to positions of power will do as well.

If the assault on meritocracy is bad for its intended beneficiaries, what about its potential victims—that is, those who used to dominate the American meritocracy? More bluntly, what does it mean for the Jews?

Up to a point, there is a paradoxical case for optimism. Until

recently, the history of Jewish success in America was rarely one of simply moving in, then up, and thence to the top of great institutions. As often, it has also been a story of being shunned by those institutions. In a preview of the present, Harvard introduced murky admissions criteria in the 1920s when its antisemitic president, A. Lawrence Lowell, feared that talented Jewish students (22 percent of the incoming class in 1922) were overwhelming the university and diminishing its WASP character. By 1933, the entering class was only 10 percent Jewish.

Yet the Jews who, instead of attending Harvard, wound up in schools such as City College went on to greater glories. Their names include Jonas Salk, Leon Lederman, A.M. Rosenthal, and Irving Kristol. Instead of joining the party, these upstarts chose to “be the party,” as Liel Leibovitz astutely observed in the “Continuity” issue of *SAPIR*. The history of 20th-century meritocracy is, in many ways, at least as much a story about how America joined its Jews—in such places as the studios of Hollywood, the magnet schools of New York, the labs at Los Alamos, the newsroom of the *New York Times*, the trading floors of Solomon Brothers, the headquarters of Oracle, Dell, Google, and Facebook—as it is a story of how Jews joined America. Being kept at arm’s length from the old meritocracy allowed us to create our own.

Today, American Jews sit, for the most part, comfortably within the meritocracies they did so much to create and nurture. There are, however, signs of disquiet, departures, and new beginnings—in parental revolts against “antiracist” pedagogies at elite private schools (now turning into groups such as Parents Unite and the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values); in Ilya Shapiro’s bold resignation, after his near-cancellation, from Georgetown Law School; in media platforms such as Bari Weiss’s *Common Sense* on Substack; in publishing ventures such as Adam Bellow’s *Wicked Son*; in supplemental educational programs such as the Tikvah summer fellowships. Similar efforts will surely follow in the general flight from creeping (or galloping) institutional mediocrity, groupthink,

and cowardice. Over time, a new cultural ecosystem will be created in which independent-minded people, Jewish or not, will flourish.

Still, underscore the words “over time.”

Promising as it may be, the University of Austin isn’t about to overtake Princeton as the most desirable destination for the cleverest teens. Yale Law School will still attract the sharpest aspiring lawyers, however censorious, vindictive, and politically correct its students and faculty have become. The DEI complex, with its ever-growing list of demands for change and its ever-growing army of in-house personnel and outside consultants, is not soon going to be stripped out of corporate or academic life. The “woke” factor may eventually cool as its excesses become more obvious. But the reigning assumptions of the anti-meritocracy will probably become embedded in our institutions in ways that will be hard to shake. Just as America (for better and worse) never got over the cultural revolution of the Sixties, we are not going to be getting over the current revolution, either.

So what’s to be done?



The challenges are many but can be summed up in one question: How do we create a new meritocracy that can capture the prestige—and hence the allure—of the old one, without incurring prohibitive costs?

It would be nice if the institutions that formerly counted as the meritocracy found their way back to rewarding merit as they once did. They probably won’t, and efforts to make them do so will have mixed results at best. It would also be nice if greater competition could be introduced into the system, with new universities or new media companies becoming peer competitors with the old ones. But the upfront price tag and long-term risks for those kinds of ventures are daunting.

Other ideas? Since *SAPIR* is a journal with a specifically Jewish focus, here are some mostly Jewish-themed proposals, which in turn might help revive meritocracy for all Americans.

1. Why not a real “Jewish Nobel”? The Genesis Prize was supposed to be that. Yet the recipients have mainly been people who have no need for either the money or the honor (Michael Bloomberg), have done nothing particularly Jewish to earn it (Anish Kapoor), or have spurned it outright (Natalie Portman).

But what if there were a million- or even multimillion-dollar prize that could transform the lives of lesser-known Jewish figures — not just scientists, scholars, and writers, but also social entrepreneurs, rabbis, and educators — whose best work might yet lie ahead of them? What if the prize were structured, like MacArthur “genius” grants, as a long-term investment in the people and their work? In that case, the payoff would be threefold: Prizewinners would garner a long-term benefit, the prize would gain immediate prestige, and the payoff to society would unfold over many years.

2. How about an Israel-based version of a super-selective Rhodes Scholarship, with an eye on cultivating extraordinary future leaders from the Diaspora? The idea comes from the essay Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy wrote for SAPIR’s “Aspiration” issue, which suggested a program in which “everyone [lives] in one renovated mansion.” Also required would be an endowment not only to administer the program and take generous financial care of its scholars, but also to fund a small but world-class faculty for a year-long, coherent course of study in ethics, history, politics, theology, languages, and archeology, among other subjects.

This wouldn’t be cheap, but neither should it be beyond the means of a few dedicated philanthropists. By fundamentally transforming the lives of a select number of exceptionally promising young Jews, it could have a long-term payoff no smaller than that of an effort like Birthright, which aims at touching, albeit briefly, the lives of hundreds of thousands.

3. Might it not also be possible to nurture Jewish excellence by endowing 100 professorships at private Israeli universities to

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attract top-flight American scholars? Many of these academics find less and less to like about their own institutions. A few, such as Princeton’s Joshua Katz, have already been stampeded off their campuses for transparently political reasons.

It doesn’t have to be in Israel. The flight of talented scholars from radical academia is an old story, and many of those scholars have found homes in innovative think tanks across the country. Some of them, such as RAND, have their own well-regarded graduate schools, offering another escape to good scholars at odds with today’s universities. Other think tanks, backed by intelligent philanthropy, might consider establishing their own graduate schools.

4. Civil disagreement about civic issues is an essential ingredient in democratic society. Yet outside the niche world of debate tournaments and Intelligence Squared, there’s not enough of it in American public life. What more could be done to create a culture of great debaters at an early age, just as the old Soviet Union created a culture of great chess players? Is there a modern-day Julius Rosenwald who would subsidize debate clubs in every low-income public school in a major urban area?

The goal would not simply be to marry a competitive spirit with mastery of a given subject. It would also be a way of reminding Americans that to disagree well, they must first understand

well. Such a venture might undermine the culture of moral certitude that has overtaken so many of America's institutions.

The list is hardly exhaustive, and the proposals surely have their flaws. They are meant only as conversation starters. But the central fact is that we will not be able to save a decent meritocracy if we do not start to work on remaking the cultural landscape, one small or midsized project at a time. Think of such projects as the lifeboats that ferried survivors from the *Titanic* to the *Carpathia*—inadequate in number and size, but lifesavers all the same. The tragedy is that so many of these efforts are starting so late. (The *Carpathia*, incidentally, was later sunk by a torpedo in World War I. Perhaps the true meaning of the metaphor is that no ship, and no meritocracy, is ever entirely safe from dangers beneath the surface.)



We inhabit a culture that has become dangerously cavalier about the enduring sources of its strength and the reasons for its global appeal.

It's a culture that disdains the ideals of the American founding as mere covers for white supremacy. It's a culture that claims that reason and open inquiry and scholarly rigor are tools of racist oppression. It's a culture that hungers for the fruits of science and technology while objecting to the social and intellectual conditions in which science and technology can flourish. It's a culture with a crippling combination of a guilty conscience and weakness of will, which leaves it unable to champion its own virtues and unwilling to pay the full price for its purported sins.

It's also a culture that lacks the courage of any of its half-felt convictions. Few people *really* want to throw the meritocracy entirely overboard in order to elevate—as Senator Hruska would—the mediocre among us, whatever the justification. And few people *really* want to make a forthright case for a meritocracy

that distributes its benefits unequally because talents are distributed unequally. We are unmoored and adrift.

Right now, we are drifting toward the rapids. It's going to take clear thinking, enterprise, and moral courage to move us elsewhere. Wouldn't it be nice if there were still real meritocrats among us who could do the job? *

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