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JEWISH EDUCATION — FOR WHAT AND FOR WHOM?

Do you remember the advertisement in the New York Times? "If you're Jewish, chances are your grandchildren won't be." The Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York believes Jewish education is the way to succeed in preserving Jewish identification. On the other hand, Charles E. Silverman, noted author, quotes his youngest son in a recent article in *Moment*: "Something must be terribly wrong when kids who were enthusiastic about beginning kindergarten hate Judaism as well as religious school in the fifth or sixth grade." According to Silverman it appears Jewish education is a failure. How do we resolve these two points of view: Jewish education is the salvation of American Jewry, or it is a disaster.

To assess this situation we need to examine three issues:

1. What is the current state of Jewish education?
2. Does Jewish education have a positive or negative effect on Jewish identification?
3. Are there any policy implications suggested by the factual situation?

In short, are the millions of dollars currently being spent by the American Jewish community a waste of resources that could better be spent on securing the future or a useful investment well worth the money?

The Current State of Jewish Education

In 1969 Walter Ackerman published an article entitled, "Jewish Education — for What?" Ackerman was not too encouraging

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about the then state of affairs. Recently Harold Himmelfarb looked at the condition of Jewish education in the 70's in an article entitled "Jewish Education — for Naught." Unfortunately he was not any more encouraging.

To answer the three questions, I have posed we may rely on some of the research of a growing corps of social scientists and educators who have studied these issues. Himmelfarb summarized the situation this way: "The proportion of eligible Jewish children receiving some type of Jewish education is declining."

In the 1960's a famous national study of Jewish education described it "like a river a mile wide and an inch deep." While 80% of youngsters received some Jewish education, it averaged only a few years. In the 1970's it is estimated that only 70% of eligible children between 6 and 18 received a Jewish education. It is likely that the situation today is no better. Indeed, according to George Pollak and Gerhard Lang of the American Association of Jewish Education estimated enrollment has declined 39% from (588,955 in) 1962 to (357,107 in) 1978. The river is drying up.

According to Himmelfarb, "Among those who receive some Jewish education, the great majority of them learn very little about their people and their faith." Indeed, Ackerman says of the afternoon schools: "The three-days-a-week school . . . cannot claim (happy) results. A recent study shows that when pupils complete the requirement established by the curriculum, they have no recognizable fluency in Hebrew and cannot understand more than carefully edited texts based on a limited vocabulary."

If the afternoon school is not praised,

what does Ackerman say about the Sunday School? "When Judged by even the least demanding standard of what it means to be an educated Jew, it is hard to avoid the feeling that the academic aspirations of the one-day-a-week school are either a joke or an act of cynical pretentiousness."

It is only for the dayschools that Ackerman reserves some praise: "If knowledge of the traditional Jewish texts is the criterion of an educated Jew, then only the dayschool graduate has the background and skills to qualify." While it is true that the dayschool movement is growing, is the Jewish community going to desert the public school en masse and send their children to dayschools? Is the dayschool the only answer? If so, what is the purpose of afternoon schools? Is there any hope for the mainstream of Jewish educational activity?

Jewish Education and Jewish Identification

There is a story about a prominent businessman who was enrolling his son in a well-known university. He shook his head dubiously when he began to examine the institution's catalog of studies. "Does my son have to take all these courses?" He asked the dean. "Can't you make it shorter? He wants to get through quickly."

"Certainly he can take a shorter course," replied the dean, "but it depends on what he wants to make of himself. When God wants to make an oak, he takes twenty years. He only takes two months to make squash!"

In a book Howard Shapiro and I published several years ago (*Ethnic Identification Among American Jews*, 1974) based on data gathered in the Jewish community of St. Paul, Minnesota, we found that Jewish education does have "a mild but lasting effect" on Jewish identification. What does this mean and how can this be so in the light of the previous pessimistic statements by Ackerman and Himmelfarb?

Our data show that Jewish education is positively related to Jewish identification, and even more significantly — it has an *independent* effect separate from the effect of the family and home environment. Here

indeed, is a positive note. Our study also shows that the more general education Jews receive, the more important Jewish education becomes as an influence on their Jewish identification. As Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider found in their study of the Jewish community of Providence, Rhode Island: "Jewish education may be one of the major forces, preventing the post-college and college-trained from rejecting their Judaism and Jewish identification." Here is another positive note.

How does our study gibe with Himmelfarb's conclusions? "The type of Jewish education received by most American Jewish youngsters has almost no long-range impact on their religious involvement." It has to do with the amount of Jewish education a child typically gets: a low amount of education produces a low level of identification; but a high amount of Jewish education produces a high level of Jewish identification. Most of us would agree to that, but the problem for the organized community is that Jewish education does not typically last very long. When it does, it can be an effective influence on Jewish identification.

And how much is enough? According to Geoffrey Bock, Jewish schooling begins to have an effect on Jewish identification when it reaches 1,000 hours and continues to reach its greatest effectiveness at 4,000 hours. But 1,000 hours of instruction is equivalent to about five years of education at a three-day-a-week school, which perhaps represents the average type of education a student gets. And what is that equivalent to in terms of a public school education? It equals the level of about a second-grade education. In truth, how many parents and community leaders would be satisfied with educating their children to such a low level of competence in general schooling?

It leads one to question whether any institution or body of people really cares about Jewish education and its need to serve the Jewish people as its primary goal. Is Jewish education the primary concern of most synagogues? No, Synagogue membership and attendance is. Is Jewish education the main concern of most local federations? No, cam-

paign gifts are. Is Jewish education the main concern of most rabbis? No, other obligations are defined by the board of directors, such as, pastoral counselling and ritual matters. Is Jewish education the main concern of most teachers? No, most teachers teaching in our schools are part-timers who have not made a professional commitment to the field of Jewish education because the community has not made a commitment to them in providing opportunities for more full-time work.

Of course, there are many individual exceptions to the general picture I describe. What I fervently hope is that those dedicated educators and teachers, rabbis and laypersons, federation volunteers and professionals, in their respective institutions and communities will form a coalition to turn this situation around before the end of the century. Perhaps, the new Coalition for Alternatives in Jewish Education (CAJE) which sponsors an annual conference at the end of the summer along with other programs and publications will be such a force.

Policy Implications

How do we do that? Social science research can provide an understanding and explanation of social reality as well as a basis for planning policies. Of course, that is not the monopoly of social scientists. Take Moses Rosenblatt, the *schochet*, for example. He was very proud of his grandson, who was in his first year at Harvard. He was also intrigued with the courses the young fellow was studying. "Tell me something," asked Rosenblatt, "what is this sociology business all about?"

"Well, its a contemporary new subject," the grandson began. "They didn't know much about it when you went to school."

"Nu, so enlighten me."

"Sociology," explained the youth in his best textbook manner, "is the science which deals with social phenomena; the systematic study of human behavior as a function of social structure and group life, etc."

"And what does that mean in plain English, if I may be so bold?"

"Simply put, it means the study of how

individuals act and what they do."

"Oh!" exclaimed Grandpa Rosenblatt, "So that's sociology! When I was a boy, we called it ordinary *Yiddishe saichel!*"

I guess that is why I went into sociology, and especially the sociology of Jewry. It makes so much good sense and offers all of us a chance to understand ourselves and our society better and, therefore, better prepare for the future. Therefore, I offer some strategies that local communities ought to consider if they are serious about the role Jewish education should play in insuring the future of the Jewish community.

1. *Strengthen Jewish high schools and promote Hebrew and Judaic Studies in high schools and colleges.* This will make possible a wider network of meaningful Jewish experiences during adolescence in particular when the individual is developing a stable identity.

2. *Indicate to youth the utility of Jewish education within the Jewish community by making continued study or an advanced Jewish education a basis for community leadership positions.* Being a successful businessman alone does not necessarily qualify one for a position of leadership in the Jewish community.

3. *Consolidate religious schools to create regional Jewish educational centers with independent boards of directors.* Such a measure would free schools of the constraints imposed by the politics, finances, and other pressures of synagogue affairs. Indeed, in many communities a partnership needs to be created between the local synagogues and Federation to help finance such a program. By making membership in a synagogue a usual prerequisite for enrolling a child in the school, the participating synagogues would not fear loss of members.

4. *Insure a quality Jewish education for every child regardless socio-economic background.* Some small portion of Jews do not provide their children with a Jewish education or join a synagogue where their children can receive one, because it costs too much. The ability of Jewish education to influence, even mildly, Jewish identification suggests that no human resources be lost or wasted

through the financial barriers that may hinder some families. This is an obligation of both school and *shul*.

5. *Expand opportunities for study and travel programs to Israel for college and high school students by subsidizing the cost so that family finances are not a barrier.* Although we have no data that explain how much of Jewish identification can be accounted for by the impact of Israel, we do know that Jewish identification and Zionism are highly interrelated and that Israel represents an important symbol of that sense of group identification. Moreover, the decision to visit Israel or live there generally reflects the individual's Jewish identification. Such study-tour programs provide young Jews the chance to observe and to some extent to participate in authentic Jewish life styles different from their own, ranging from the Kibbutz experience to the Mea Shearim quarters of Jerusalem's Hasidic communities.

All of these efforts take funds. Here is the greatest challenge facing the Jewish communities: to effectively redistribute the financial resources of the community and its individual organizations, synagogues, welfare, social philanthropic, and cultural associations, to achieve the goals of educating our young people. Without a massive restructuring of the priorities and activities to Jewish communities, no effective change

will take place. The greater the effort in attempting to carry out planned social change, the more it will permeate the community and the more it will effectively implement the desired change. A national fund could be established for financing Jewish education. As Harold Himmelfarb has suggested this fund would solicit money on which it agreed to pay a specified interest rate and, in turn, would invest the funds to generate income which would support Jewish education.

Finally, along with this redistribution of resources must come the further democratization of Jewish communal life. The increased participation in the Jewish community and synagogues of students, educators, women, and professional social workers in decision-making responsibilities, in the community needs to be encouraged. The alternative is the perpetuation of an unrepresentative power elite. Criteria for participation in decision-making responsibilities should be based on the degree of contribution to the community — not just in dollars and cents but in *sechel* and *sense*.

Ask yourself Jewish education for what? Answer Jewish education for personal Jewish identification and a creative Jewish communal future. Ask yourself Jewish education for whom? Answer Jewish education for Jewish children of all ages — the born and yet to be born.