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Alternative Jewish Education: The Havurah Model

*Here we are, New Yorkers, Americans, Jews, and we're obviously looking for something — and we're looking for it in a certain framework. We have some inkling that Judaism may have that thing that we're looking for; however, we haven't found it there in the past.**

Criticism of Jewish education is not new; rabbis, teachers, parents, and students have been complaining for years about the sad state of Jewish schools. Despite the obvious discontent of both professionals and clients, however, there have been few concerted efforts to revitalize and reconstruct Jewish schools in a fundamental way. Institutions such as the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and local bureaus of Jewish education have continued to place a primary emphasis on teacher education and on the production of curricular materials. But well educated teachers and good textbooks can have only a minor influence in schools where the basic problems lie elsewhere.

The most serious problem faced by Jewish schools (excepting, perhaps, some of the day schools) is that they are responsible for conveying subject matters which are culturally alien to both students and parents who are immersed in an American milieu. To make matters worse, most Jewish parents are highly ambivalent about the role of Judaism in their own lives. They are more than happy to hand the responsibility of educating their children over to the "experts" at the school. They are content to be unaware of and uninvolved in the school's activities. Their children, in turn, receive a very clear message about the low priority of Jewish education.

A second problem of most Jewish schools is that their curricula are conceived of as fixed bodies of information to be transmitted to the students. Students are given few indications that Judaism is a religion and culture which can permeate one's entire life, which evokes deep emotions, and which addresses itself to issues of

perennial concern. The Jewish tradition is portrayed as a monolith; little is said about variations in belief and practice throughout Jewish history. Students are not given a sense that they can share in the creative evolution of the Jewish tradition.

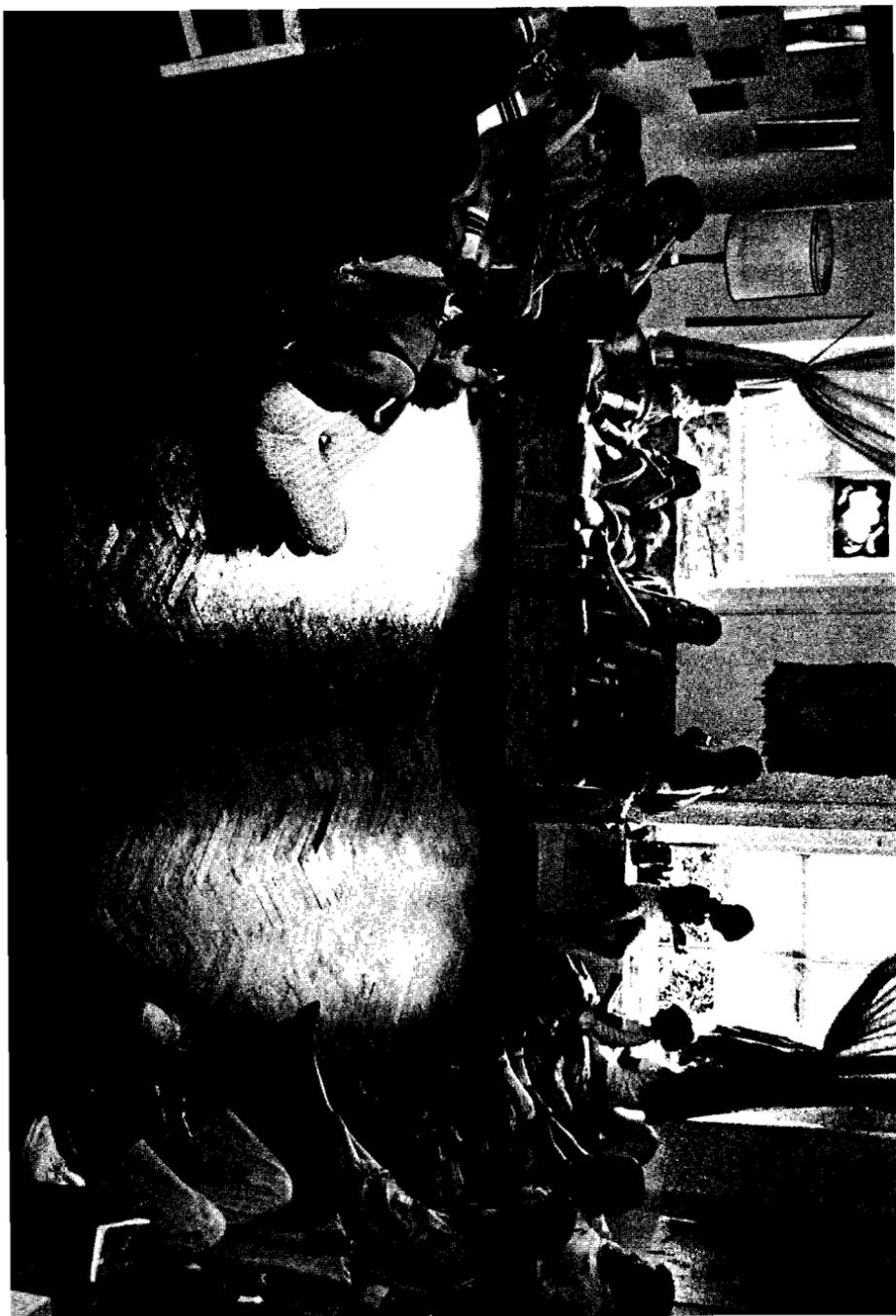
Finally, most Jewish schools continue to function along rigid organizational lines. Each teacher is responsible for about twenty students at a time; lecturing and drill, therefore, are the primary modes of instruction. There have been relatively few experiments with open classrooms, team teaching, or the use of manipulative materials and simulation games, to name but a few of the innovations which have been widely implemented in secular schools. Art and music are peripheral to and segregated from the major subjects. The revolution of the 1960's in American education has yet to hit the majority of Jewish schools.

The (1) lack of communication between parents and teachers; (2) reduction of the Jewish tradition to a body of information, and (3) maintenance of rigid instructional patterns serve to reinforce one another. It would be difficult to change one factor without changing the others as well. What is needed is a process of organizational renewal which will operate on all three fronts simultaneously. We have, for the past year, been involved in a school which has successfully overcome the structural defects which plague most Jewish schools. The Havurah School was begun as a tentative and modest experiment; the experiment has succeeded far beyond the expectations of its founders.

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My kids came to me and said, "Are we Jewish? Beth says she is. What's that?" And from there, we arrived at the Havurah School. I can say that I'm Jewish, but I don't know what that means. I want my kids to know what that means.

The Havurah school was founded in April, 1975, by a small group of Upper-West-Side parents in conjunction with two members of the New York Havurah, Jay Greenspan and Isa Aron. The parents had, at the start, only a vague idea of the kind of Jewish education they wanted for their children; they had a very clear idea, however, of what they did not want. All felt that their own Jewish educations had been joyless, irrelevant, and often oppressive. None felt comfortable joining a synagogue or sending their children to a local Hebrew school; yet they wanted their children to appreciate Judaism



Opening meeting.

Photograph by Bill Aron

as a cultural and religious system, and to learn about a variety of Jewish life styles and experiences, both past and present.

The parents and the Havurah teachers decided, at the outset, that the school would be run as a cooperative; parents would assist teachers on a rotating basis, and parents and teachers would make major educational decisions together. In the course of these early meetings, parents began to voice their ambivalences towards Judaism, and decided to devote a portion of their meetings to a discussion of issues related to their own Jewish identities.

In the year since this beginning the school has grown to include 14 families and two additional teachers, Janice Rous and Michael Wolf; there are now 23 children, ranging in age from five to eleven. When we reached this number, we decided not to take in any new families, in the interest of maintaining the closeness of the group. The school meets on Friday afternoons from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Havurah apartment, and parent meetings are held approximately every other week. On holidays there are communal dinners. In addition, we have had one weekend retreat together and a second is planned for the fall.

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This school was conceived of in reaction. But the big thing that happened this year was that we started being the initiators, not only the reactors.

The school is organized along the lines of an open classroom, with four learning centers, and a group meeting at the beginning and end of each session. Each session focuses on a particular theme, such as a Bible story, Jewish life in a historical period, or an upcoming holiday. The theme of the day is explored through stories, dramatic improvisation, manipulative games, songs, and work in a variety of artistic media. In addition, there is an ongoing Hebrew center consisting of a variety of individualized materials and games. Before the start of each major unit parents and teachers meet to discuss the values, concepts, and issues related to the holiday, Biblical portion, or historical era, and to decide how they will be dealt with in the school. Since there are few adequate textbooks or materials available commercially, almost all the materials used in the school are made by the teachers themselves.

The atmosphere of the school is pleasant and relaxed; yet there



Learning center: working on a class newspaper.

Photograph by Bill Aron

is always a lot of activity. Aside from the two parents who assist in the school each week, other parents often drop by for all or part of a session; one parent has been coming each week to tell stories at the closing meeting. The children enjoy the school immensely; the three newest students, in fact, were brought to the school by their friends, after which they asked to stay on.

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We're trying very hard, in this school, not to create more contradictions for the kids, and not to create more situations in which there is a capital J-E-W-I-S-H meaning of what it is to be Jewish, and that's difficult.

People who hear about the Havurah School often ask whether our model is applicable to other settings. Could similar schools operate successfully in other communities? We are convinced that any congenial and like-minded group of parents and teachers could start a similar school, provided they had the will and energy to discuss openly the many religious and educational issues which must be addressed. The parents in such a school would not have to be especially learned, but they would have to be committed to working through these issues, and they would have to be open to learning from one another and from the teachers.

It is essential, in our opinion, that such a school be kept small. The Havurah School was originally named for its location in the apartment of the New York Havurah, but the name has turned out to be quite apt, for the parents, teachers, and students have, in effect, formed their own Havurah. The small size of the group has allowed for meaningful exchange in discussions and has fostered an intimacy and sense of community which would have been more difficult to develop in a larger group. It seems far more sensible to break up a school into a number of small, relatively homogeneous groupings, than to maintain one large impersonal central institution, in which vital differences in ideology and observance are either ignored or reduced to an inappropriate common denominator.

A school structured along the lines of the Havurah School might, initially, be more difficult for teachers to work in, but, we feel, they would find the effort worthwhile. While it is true that a teacher in such a school would have to invest more energy into planning lessons and devising appropriate materials, he or she would



Story-telling.

Photograph by Bill Aron

derive the advantage of never feeling isolated, of always having other teachers and parents from whom to draw support and with whom to share problems. In our year teaching at the Havurah School, both the parents and the teachers have grown beyond measure through the experience of working together.

I think that we will never ever talk out what it means to be Jew. Whether we know it or not, it permeates every pore of our body. The more we talk about it, the more we realize this. I think that many of us assumed for much of our lives that Judaism was not an important factor for us, and that was a kind of denial. But now that we've opened ourselves up to this, we've discovered that our Jewishness really is there, that it is everywhere.

*All quotations are from parent-teacher meetings at the Havurah School.